

Theories of Language Acquisition

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(A concise, organized overview for quick reference)

1. Overview

- **Goal:** Explain how children (and, to some extent, adults) acquire a first language (L1) and how second languages (L2) are learned.
 - **Key Questions:**
 1. What innate capacities, if any, are required?
 2. What role does the environment play?
 3. How do cognitive, social, and biological factors interact?
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2. Classical/Nativist Perspective

Concept	Main Proponent(s)	Core Idea	Supporting Evidence
Universal Grammar (UG)	Noam Chomsky	Humans are born with an innate, domain-specific language faculty that contains a set of universal principles and parameters.	- Rapid acquisition despite limited input (“poverty of the stimulus”). - Similar developmental milestones across cultures. - Language-specific errors (e.g., over-generalization of rules).

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Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)	Lenneberg, later refined by others	There is a biologically determined window (roughly birth to puberty) during which language acquisition proceeds most naturally. After this period, attaining native-like proficiency becomes markedly harder.	- Cases of late L1 learners (e.g., Genie) show persistent deficits. - Age-of-onset effects in L2 phonology and syntax.

Key Takeaways

- Emphasizes *innateness* and *biological constraints*.
- Treats language as a modular cognitive system distinct from general cognition.

3. Behaviorist / Empiricist Perspective

Concept	Main Proponent(s)	Core Idea	Supporting Evidence
Stimulus-Response Learning	B.F. Skinner	Language is acquired through imitation, reinforcement, and habit formation.	- Early experiments on operant conditioning with verbal behavior. - Observable reinforcement patterns in caregiver-child interaction.
Statistical Learning (modern extension)	Saffran, Aslin, Newport	Learners extract regularities (e.g., transitional probabilities) from the input stream, building lexical and grammatical knowledge.	- Infants segment words from continuous speech using statistical cues. - Adults can learn artificial grammars from exposure alone.

Key Takeaways

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- Language acquisition is driven by *environmental input* and *learning mechanisms* common to other domains.
 - Reinforcement is not the sole driver; *pattern detection* plays a central role.
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4. Interactionist / Constructivist Perspectives

Theory	Proponents	Core Idea	Evidence
Social Interactionist	Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner	Language emerges through social interaction; caregivers scaffold (“zone of proximal development”) the child’s linguistic growth.	- “Motherese” (infant? directed speech) enhances attention and learning. - Joint attention predicts vocabulary size.
Cognitive Constructivism	Jean Piaget (later adapted)	Language acquisition parallels overall cognitive development; children construct linguistic knowledge through active problem-solving.	- Correlations between stages of sensorimotor, preoperational, and linguistic milestones.
Connectionist Models	Rumelhart & McClelland, Elman	Language learning results from the gradual strengthening of connections in a neural network; no explicit rules are encoded.	- Simulations that learn past-tense forms, pluralization, and syntax from exposure.