**Lesson 05 : Psycholinguistics: Branches, Goals , topics and HISTORY**

**Branches and Goals of Psycholinguistics**

**Language Processing :**

What happens in the human mind when we speak/read/write/ listen?

What are the processes and mechanisms underlying this complex activity?

**Language Acquisition :**

How do children learn to speak?

How do they acquire their mother tongue?

**Neurolinguistics :**

How is language represented in the human brain?

**Language Processing:**

Two main activities are involved:

Speech production (what is going on from thought to output, to the actual production of a sound wave) Comprehension (a complementary activity to speech produc­tion) It is not just perception, it is also how do we interpret what is being said to us, how do we analyse the linguistic units (words) It is really exciting to find out about the phases of these activities that in reality might last for less than a second but are extremely complex. Perhaps the most complex activity of human cognition!

**Language Acquisition:**

We’re dealing with children!

Despite their limited mental abilities, they acquire a language within just a few years of their lives. They’re also confronted with input that is “not complete” in a sense...? There are three central issues:

1. Acquisition studies: how to study young children, they cannot answer our questions at this stage!
2. Strategies applied by children: i.e. over generalizing morpholo­gical aspects in what they produce.
3. Phases.

**Neurolinguistics :**

The human brain is made of two lobes: the right and the left. Each one of them is responsible of particular functions. Medical imagery has shown that language zones are found in the left hemisphere of the brain.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**HISTORY OF PSYCHOLINGUISTICS :**

SLA has traditionally been dominated by a linguistic approach. Indeed, if we consider the first generation of applied linguists, those remarkable characters who founded the field, most of them had linguistics as their background training. When we contemplate the possible reasons for this linguistic dominance.[[2]](#footnote-3)

According to Levelt (2013:3), “The term “psycholinguistic” was introduced in 1936 by Jacob Kantor, but it was rarely used until 1946, when his student Nicholas Pronko published his article Language and psycholinguistics: A review.” The article broadly covers approaches to language phenomena, including “the essential psychological

features of linguistic happenings”, studies of language acquisition, language abilities, gestural language, aphasia, and more. In this work, the term “psycholinguistics” was used, for the first time, used to denote an interdisciplinary field of study that could be theoretically coherent. The term soon became widely accepted and established as a

discipline, coherent in both method and theory.

So, the framework of the early 1950s introduced a booming decade in psycholinguistics. And became a widely shared opinion that the discipline of psycholinguistics emerged during the 1950s and more precisely in 1951.

Levelt (2013:2-3) notes that the year 1951 stands out as a hinge in the history of psycholinguistics, although not by design. It was sheer coincidence that three landmark events were packed in that one year halfway through the twentieth century:

The first event was the Interdisciplinary Summer Seminar in Psychology and Linguistics, which was held at Cornell University from June 18 to August 10. The programme set out to “explore the relationships existing between the fields of

psychology and linguistics” and to make recommendations for the development of a

field of overlap coined “psycholinguistics.” This summer seminar is thus widely considered to be the birth of modern psycholinguistics.

The second event was the publication of George Miller’s Language and communication. This textbook treats the state of art in the psychology of language and communication, hinting at the emerging new discipline of psycholinguistics.

The third landmark was Karl Lashley’s paper “The problem of serial order in behavior”, being the first frontal attack on the traditional behaviorist associativechain theories of serial behavior, such as speech and language. In the article, Lashley

avers that a new syntactic approach to the treatment of all skilled hierarchical behavior would become a core issue in the imminent “cognitive revolution” It is important to mention that Chomsky, a major pioneer contributor in the field of

psycholinguistics, beginning in the 1950s, helped establish a new relationship between linguistics and psychology. Chomsky argued that linguistics should be understood as a part of cognitive psychology, in his first book, Syntactic Structures

(1957); he however, opposed the traditional learning theory basis of language acquisition. Consequently, his expressed a contrary view from the behaviorist view of the mind as a tabula rasa as well as from the verbal learning theory of

behaviorism. In Chomsky's view, certain aspects of linguistic knowledge and ability ere the product of a universal innate ability, or language acquisition device (LAD), being a device that enables each normal child to construct a systematic grammar and generate phrases (see D’Agostino 1986).

So, it is clear that psycholinguistics as a scientific endeavour started as far back as

the 18th century. However, it must be stressed that empirical research in psycholinguistics began in earnest towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Aitchison (1990) asserts that the first known experiment in psycholinguistics was conducted by the German philosopher, Dietrich Tiedemann. He used his son as the experiment. In his study, he carefully recorded the linguistic development of his son along with other developmental characteristics that he exhibited. The first experimental record in psycholinguistics is nonetheless credited to the British psychologist Francis Galton (1822-1911).

However, it was only recently, precisely the middle of the 20th century, that the field

got some serious attention from scholars. It was believed that Noam Chomsky is the father of psycholinguistics, given the general feeling and belief that the field grew out of his research efforts in linguistics and psychology of language In agreement with Aitchison, Reber (1987) asserts that psycholinguistics has its beginning pre-20th century but nevertheless re-invented itself in the middle of the century. As earlier hinted, by the 1950s and 1960s, the field has grown in leaps and

bounds due to the assiduous work of such scholars like Noam Chomsky, Zelig Harris,

George Miller, Karl Lashley, Charles Osgood, John Carroll, Thomas Sebeok, and Herbert Simon among a host of others. Though, in his view, which appears to be Roger Brown’s as noted by Reber, psycholinguistics seems an aberration as a name to call the emerging field that linked psychology to linguistics. It is better to have used such a term like psycho-linguistics, with a hyphen separating and indicating the hybrid nature of the discipline in order for it not to seem like a ‘deranged polyglot’ as

claimed by Roger Brown (1958) In Reber’s view, psycholinguistics started to decline by the 1970s as many questions seemingly trail it. He nonetheless acknowledged that scholarship of Chomsky did not decline. And considering that Chomsky is always in ‘bold relief’ when discussing the scholarship of psycholinguistics, one finds it difficult to agree with his claim that the

field is in decline.[[3]](#footnote-4)

1. Ouchdi Ilhem Zoubida : **Courses in Psycholinguistics for Master one students in language sciences**, Abou Bekr Belkaid University- Tlemcen-, Faculty of Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of English, 2022., p08 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Zoltán Dörnyei, Psychology and Language Learning: The Past, the Present and the Future, University of Nottingham, UK

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Iyabode O. Nwabueze et all : **COURSE TITLE: PSYCHOLINGUITICS**, National Open University of Nigeria, FACULTY OF ARTS , 2020, p11, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)