**Lesson 11 : THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

**Linguistic theories:**

Formal linguistic theories have traditionally focused on the analysis of the language output, conceptualized as a static state without a prominent developmental or transitional component. In this tradition, thus, language acquisition was seen as a “movement through successive grammars (interlanguages).[[1]](#footnote-2)

**First language acquisition:**

**The Immitation, Nativism, or Behaviourist Perspective**:

Theory of learning that was very influential in the 1940s and 1950s

Language has long been thought of a process of imitation, and reinforcement.

Imitation theory is based on an empirical or behavioral approach.

Children start out as clean slates and language learning is process of getting linguistic habits printed on these slates.

Language Acquisition is a process of experience.

Language is a „conditioned behavior‟: the stimulus response process.

Stimulus Response Feedback Reinforcement

Thus, Children learn language step by step

**Imitation**

**Repetition**

**Memorization**

**Controlled drilling**

**Reinforcement**

Reinforcement can either be positive or negative

Popular View: Children learn to speak by imitating the utterances heard around them and analogy.

Children strengthen their responses by the repetitions, corrections, and other reactions that adults provide, thus language is practice based

General perception is that there is no difference between the way one learns a language and the way one learns to do anything else

Main focus is on inducing the child to behave with the help of mechanical drills and exercises

Learning is controlled by the conditions under which it take place and that, as long as individual are subjected on the same condition, they will learn in the same condition.

**Two Kinds Of Evidence Used To Criticize**

**Behaviorist Theory:**

First Evidence: Based on the kind of language children produce.

first piece of evidence taken from the way children handle irregular grammatical patterns.

While encountering irregular items, there is a stage when they replace forms based on the regular patterns of language.

Gradually they switch over to the process of „analogy‟ – a reasoning process as they start working out for themselves.

Second Evidence: Based on what children do not produce.

The other evidence is based on the way children seem unable to imitate adult grammatical constructions exactly.

Best known demonstration of this principle is provided by American Psycholinguist David McNeill (1933).

Child: Nobody don‟t like me

Mother: No, say „no body likes me‟

Child: Nobody don‟t like me (eight repetitions of this dialogue).

Mother: No, now listen carefully: say „no body likes me‟.

Child: Oh! No body don‟t likes me

Thus, language acquisition is more a matter of maturation than of imitation.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**EMPIRICISM:**

A view that all knowledge is acquired through **experience**. In a language-acquisition context, a view that an infant acquires language chiefly through exposure to the speech of those about it. Empiricist approaches to language acquisition maintain that the speech to which the child is exposed (child directed speech plus ambient adult speech) provides linguistic information of sufficient quality and quantity to support acquisition. An assumption of this kind underlies:

**Behaviourism:** a view of language as a set of habits acquired when the child imitates the carer and is rewarded;.

**Connectionism:** a view that the infant receives sufficient evidence to support a learning process in which connections are established between certain words and certain concepts and are strengthened by further exposure; .

**Social-interactionism:** the view that language is the outcome of the child’s need to relate socially to those about it and/or the child’s need to achieve certain pragmatic functions.[[3]](#footnote-4)

**Nativist or Innateness Theory:**

Limitations of Behaviorist view of language acquisition led in 1960‟s to the alternative „generative‟ account of language.

Main Argument: Children must be born with an innate capacity for language development

children are born with an innate propensity for language acquisition, and that this ability makes the task of learning a first language easier than it would otherwise be.

The human brain is ready naturally for language in the sense when children are exposed to speech, certain general principles for discovering or structuring language automatically begin to operate

Chomsky originally theorized that children were born with a hard-wired **language acquisition device** (LAD) in their brains. He later expanded this idea into that of Universal Grammar, a set of innate principles and adjustable parameters that are common to all human languages. The child exploits its LAD to make sense of the utterances heard around it, deriving from this „primary

linguistic data‟ – the grammar of the language

According to Chomsky, the presence of Universal Grammar in the brains of children allow them to deduce the structure of their native languages from "mere exposure".

Primary data is then used to make sentences or structures after a process of trial and error, correspond to those in adult speech.

**Innate Theory is criticized for :**

The role of adult speech can not be ruled out in providing a means of enabling children to work out the regularities of language for themselves

It has proved difficult to formulate the detailed properties of LAD in an uncontroversial manner, in the light of the changes in generative linguistic theory that have taken place in later years, and meanwhile, alternative accounts of the acquisition process have evolved.

that there are principles of grammar that cannot be learned on the basis of positive input alone

The concept of LAD is unsupported by evolutionary anthropology which shows a gradual adaptation of the human body to the use of language, rather than a sudden appearance of a complete set of binary parameters (which are common to digital computers but not to neurological systems such as a human brain)

delineating the whole spectrum of possible grammars ever to have existed and ever to exist.

The theory has several hypothetical constructs, such as movement, empty categories, complex underlying structures, and strict binary branching, that cannot possibly be acquired from any amount of input.

Mentalists‟ emphasis on the rule-learning is over-enthusiastic.[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Input Theory :**

The studies of Motherese in the 1970‟s focused upon the maternal input.

Main Argument: Parents do not talk to their children in the same way as they talk to other adults and seem to be capable of adapting their

language to give the child maximum opportunity to interact and learn

Main Figure: C. A. Ferguson (1977)

The utterances of the parents are considerably and subconsciously simplified especially with respect to grammar and meaning and sentences are shorter.

The meanings conveyed by mothers are predominantly concrete and there is a more restricted range of sentences.

**CONNETIONISM :**

It differs sharply from the Chomskyan innatist

theory, they hypothesize that language acquisition

does not requiere a separate “module of the mind”

Language acquisition in terms of how children acquire links or connections between words and phrases and the situation in which they occur.

When children hear a word or phrase in the context of a specific object, event or person, an association in created in the child‟s mind between the word or phrase and what it represents.

Children are exposed to many thousands of opportunities to learn words and phrases.[[5]](#footnote-6)

1. Hulstijn, J. H. (2002). Towards a unified account of the representation, processing and

   acquisition of second language knowledge. Second Language Research, 18(3), 193–223. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Karina Salcedo Viteri : PSYCHOLOGY AND

   LANGUAGE LEARNING, **CHAPTER 1 : EXPLAINING FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. **Clark, E, V. (2009). First Language Acquisition. Cambridge University Press.** [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Karina Salcedo Viteri : PSYCHOLOGY AND

   LANGUAGE LEARNING, **CHAPTER 1**

   **EXPLAINING FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Karina Salcedo Viteri : PSYCHOLOGY AND

   LANGUAGE LEARNING, **CHAPTER 1**

   **EXPLAINING FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION** [↑](#footnote-ref-6)