**Lesson 12 : THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION – Part 02 -**

**SOCIAL-INTERACTIONISM :**

Approaches to first language acquisition which emphasise the parts played by the child’s environment, its social instincts, its pragmatic needs and its relationship with the carer. Those who take this position do not necessarily deny the existence of an innately endowed capacity for language. But they maintain that genetic factors, if they exist, are insufficient on their own to ensure that language develops. Nor is simple exposure to language enough. What is important is the interaction, both linguistic and non-linguistic, which derives from the child’s need to communicate. It is argued that child directed speech (CDS) is not as impoverished as Chomsky suggests. The modifications that are made to adult speech (slow rate, repetitions, set phrases, simple syntax and heightened intonation patterns) appear to assist the child in decoding what is said. In response to the nativist assertion that children do not receive feedback on ill-formed utterances, social-interactionists claim that correction is often indirect.

Without specifically correcting a child, parents show puzzlement, recast utterances or give responses that exemplify the correct form. There is also evidence that carers grade their language sensitively, increasing sentence length and complexity as the child gets older in response to evidence of the child’s linguistic development. A child’s language does not develop faster in proportion to the level of input by the carer. But there appears to be a correlation between speed of acquisition and the pragmatic content of CDS – in particular, the extent to which, through questions, directives, acknowledgements and references to the child’s activities, the adult invites interaction by the child. Social-interactionist views stress the importance of the infant’s relationship to its environment. One aspect is the familiarity of certain objects and events which ensures that there is a repetitive and even a ritualistic quality to much of the language that is used. Interaction with the principal carer (especially in the form of play) also follows predictable sequences; and it is through play that semantic relationships such as the agent/object distinction are said to become manifest. The carer plays an important role in interpreting new events as they arise.

 Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, has greatly influenced social interactionist thinking. He stressed the connections between speech, thought and interaction. For him, the early stages of a child’s language are characterised by egocentric speech, utterances which include what for an adult would be private thoughts. As the child becomes more aware of its social context, a distinction is made between ideas directed at others and ideas directed at oneself. Vygotsky saw the child’s development as a progress from dependency to independence. The adult offers support (termed scaffolding in more recent accounts) which is gradually withdrawn as a task becomes more familiar and as the child becomes more practised.

 Jerome Bruner, in the Vygotskyan tradition, places great importance on carer–child interaction. For him, the linguistic relationship between carer and infant begins with the establishment of joint reference, the carer using various techniques to focus the child’s attention on an object or event. Mother and infant then develop a set of standard interactional routines where the infant knows what to expect and references are to familiar surroundings. Bruner does not accept that the young child has to develop for itself a set of relationships with the world around it; he asserts that they mainly derive their awareness of reality through the mediation of others. He is critical of the notion that a child has to distinguish between the public world and the private, which he suggests owes too much to Western culture. Similarly, he challenges the established wisdom that the child lacks a theory of mind, the ability to identify with the point-of-view of others, and suggests that this capacity may be innate. He is willing to accept that some semantic aspects of language may be innate. But also innate is a set of responses to human behaviour which permit the infant to derive the rules of language from experiencing it in use.

 M.A.K. Halliday’s functional account, based upon observation of his son Nigel, views language acquisition as fuelled by the child’s need to express certain basic pragmatic concepts. Even at a pre-linguistic stage, the child may employ proto-language for this purpose, using certain sounds consistently to express simple needs and feelings. The child’s first utterances, according to Halliday, fulfil four basic functions. There is then a gradual increase in the range of meanings which the child learns to express within these areas, even if the forms used are not those of adult language. The child also becomes aware of the nature of interpersonal discourse: it engages in exchanges which resemble dialogue, and thus finds its way towards the expression of attitudes and wishes and the use of syntactic features such as the interrogative. In a third phase, the child’s functional repertoire gradually comes to resemble that of an adult. [[1]](#footnote-2)

**The Universal Grammar Approach :**

According to Noam Chomsky, UG focuses to

answer three basic questions about human

language:

1) What constitutes knowledge of language?

2) How knowledge of language is acquired?

3) How is knowledge of language put to use?

„Knowledge of language‟ stands in UG for the

subconscious mental representation of language

which underlies all language use:

**What Constitutes Knowledge of Language and how it is acquired:**

UG claims that all human beings inherit a universal set of principles and parameters which control the shape human

language can take

Chomsky‟s proposed principles are unvarying and apply to all human languages similar to one another; in contrast, parameters possess a limited number of open values which characterize differences between languages

The biologically endowed UG equip the children naturally with a clear set of expectations about the shape of the language according to a predetermined timetable and atrophies with age.

**Criticism of UG Theory :**

Linguistically, this approach‟s primary concern is only syntax.

Semantics, Pragmatics and discourse are completely excluded

UG is concerned exclusively with the developmental linguistic route. Social and psychological variables are ignored

UG approach is methodological. The theory is

preoccupied with modeling of competence. The study of naturalistic performance is not seen as a suitable source to analyze mental representations of language.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**COGNITIVISM:**

Approaches to language acquisition which view the process as closely linked to general cognition and to cognitive development. Some accounts leave open the extent to which certain aspects of language are innate; but all take the view that acquisition is primarily driven by the way in which the infant’s cognitive abilities are brought to bear upon the input to which it is exposed. These cognitive abilities may reflect developing awareness of objects, spatial relations, defining characteristics etc., or they may take the form of perceptual biases which incline the child to recognise patterns in linguistic material. Among views on acquisition which can be characterised as ‘cognitive’ are:

- An infant cannot express concepts in language unless it has previously developed them. Example: A child cannot use language to refer to objects that are not visible unless it has grasped the idea of object permanence. For Piaget, language was the product of cognitive and perceptual processes. His research with children led him to conclude that there were four stages of cognitive development. They represent a gradual progression and not a sudden shift in behaviour; and the age at which a particular child goes through each varies considerably. However, they are closely linked to linguistic development.

- Both language and cognition are part of a staged maturation programme, in which they operate in parallel, supporting each other. For Vygotsky, thought exists pre-verbally. There is initially a separation between thought and language: the infant’s first words are devoid of thought. During three phases, the separate roles of thought and language become established.

- Innate cognitive tendencies may predispose us:

a. To find patterns in language data (as in data in general). A theory of syntactic bootstrapping postulates that infants reach conclusions about words on the basis of their inflections and other grammatical properties: thus the child learns that the difference between It’s sib and It’s a sib serves to distinguish real-world entities that are mass from those that are count.

b. To adopt certain strategies in response to language data. Slobin (1973) concludes that infants apply a set of universal strategies or operating principles in order to deconstruct the input to which they are exposed. (Pay attention to the ends of words. Pay attention to the order of words and morphemes.) More cognitively complex features are acquired later.

c. To apply individual learning styles to language data. Some infants appear to break the input into words, while others acquire chunks of language in a holistic manner.

-The infant’s limited cognitive capacity renders it more sensitive to the features of language than it might be before or later. The ‘less is more’ argument holds that it may be the very limitations of the infant’s early cognitive state which enable it to identify structure in language and to recognise that language constitutes a set of inter-related symbols.[[3]](#footnote-4)

1. **Clark, E, V. (2009). First Language Acquisition. Cambridge University Press.** [↑](#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)