

Language Acquisition

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Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. This capacity involves the picking up of diverse capacities including syntax, phonetics, and an extensive vocabulary. This language might be vocal as with speech or manual as in sign. Language acquisition usually refers to first language acquisition, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language, rather than second language acquisition, which deals with acquisition (in both children and adults) of additional languages.

The capacity to acquire and use language is a key aspect that distinguishes humans from other organisms. While many forms of animal communication exist, they have a limited range of nonsyntactically structured vocabulary tokens that lack cross cultural variation between groups.

A major concern in understanding language acquisition is how these capacities are picked up by infants from what appears to be very little input. A range of theories of language acquisition has been created in order to explain this apparent problem including innatism in which a child is born prepared in some manner with these capacities, as opposed to the other theories in which language is simply learned.

History

Plato felt that the word-meaning mapping in some form was innate. Sanskrit grammarians debated over twelve centuries whether meaning was god-given (possibly innate) or was learned from older convention--e.g. a child learning the word for cow by listening to trusted speakers talking about cows.

In modern times, empiricists like Hobbes and Locke argued that knowledge (and for Locke, language) emerge ultimately from abstracted sense impressions. This led to Carnap's Aufbau, an attempt to learn all knowledge from sense datum, using the notion of "remembered as similar" to bind these into clusters, which would eventually map to language.

Under Behaviorism, it was argued that language may be learned through a form of operant conditioning. In B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behaviour (1957), he suggested that the successful use of a sign such as a word or lexical unit, given a certain stimulus, reinforces its "momentary" or contextual probability. Empiricist theories of language acquisition include statistical learning theories of language acquisition, Relational Frame Theory, functionalist linguistics, social interactionist theory, and usage-based language acquisition.

This behaviourist idea was strongly attacked by Noam Chomsky in a review article in 1959, calling it "largely mythology" and a "serious delusion". Instead, Chomsky argued for a more theoretical approach, based on a study of syntax.

General approaches

Social interactionism

Social interactionist theory consists of a number of hypotheses on language acquisition. These hypotheses deal with written, spoken, or visual social tools which consist of complex systems of symbols and rules on language acquisition and development. The compromise between "nature" and "nurture" is the "interactionist" approach. In addition, for years, psychologists and researchers have been asking the same question. What are the language behaviors that nature provides innately and what are those behaviors that are realized by environmental exposure, which is nurture.

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