



PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

LECTURE 13

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION/LEARNING THEORIES

BEHAVIORAL THEORY

B.F. Skinner is considered to be the father of the modern behavioral theory. The behavioral perspective states that language is a set of verbal behaviors learned through *operant conditioning*.

Operant conditioning is a method of changing behavior so that a desired behavior is reinforced immediately after it occurs. This theory can be applied to many aspects of human learning including speech and language. The theory centers around the idea that children are conditioned by their environment and the reinforcement of their communication

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Behaviorists believe that language behaviors are learned by imitation, reinforcement, and copying adult language behaviors. They consider language to be determined not by experimentation or self-discovery, but by selective reinforcements from speech and language models, usually parents or other family members. Behaviorists focus on external forces that shape a child's language and see the child as a reactor to these forces. (Hulit, Howard, & Fahey, 2011)

IMITATION AND PRACTICE

Two other concepts that are important for understanding the behaviorist ideas of speech and language development are *imitation* and *practice*.

A young child will try to imitate sounds and words he hears his parents say the best he can. When a child says a word that sounds close to what the parents say, they accept and reinforce it. In other words, they begin *shaping* the word until the child can eventually say the word as well as the parents do.

NATIVISTIC THEORY

The main theorist associated with the nativist theory is Noam Chomsky. The *nativistic theory* is a biologically-based theory which states that language is innate, physiologically determined, and genetically transmitted. This means that a newborn baby is "pre-wired" for language acquisition and a linguistic mechanism is activated by exposure to language. (Hulit, Howard, & Fahey, 2011).

This theory believes that language is universal and unique to only humans and that unless there are severe mental or physical limitations, or severe isolation and deprivation, humans will acquire language. The nativistic theory argues that caregivers do not teach children the understanding of language and do not usually provide feedback about the correctness of their utterances. (Pinker, 1984).

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DEVICE

The main theorist associated with the nativist theory is Noam Chomsky. He came up with the idea of the *language acquisition device* (LAD). The LAD is a language organ that is hard-wired into our brains at birth. Once a child is exposed to language, the LAD activates.

SEMANTIC-COGNITIVE THEORY

- The semantic-cognitive theory is a perspective of language development that emphasizes the interrelationship between language learning and cognition; that is, the meanings conveyed by a child's productions. Children demonstrate certain cognitive abilities as a corresponding language behavior emerges (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). The semantic meaning that a person wants to communicate determines the words and word order (syntactic form) the person uses. For example, children know what they want to communicate (cognition) but do not always use the correct semantics or grammar. Also, children may not know the correct use of a word or understand that a word can have more than one meaning.

SOCIAL-PRAGMATIC THEORY

- The social-pragmatic theory considers communication as the basic function of language. This perspective is first seen in infant-caregiver interactions in which the caregiver responds to an infant's sounds and gestures.

The prerequisites for the social-pragmatic theory are:

- 1.) The infant must have a caregiver in close proximity to see, hear, or touch
- 2.) The caregiver must provide the infant with basic physical needs such as food, warmth, and exploring the environment

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- 3.) The infant must develop an attachment to the caregiver
- 4.) The infant and caregiver must be able to attend to the same objects or actions simultaneously
- 5.) The infant and caregiver engage in turn-taking in both verbal and nonverbal behaviors (McLaughlin, 2006).

In ideal parent-child communication, all of the five prerequisites are met in most interactions. The social-pragmatic perspective emphasizes the importance of the communicative partner's role; the partner's interpretation of what is said defines the results of the speech act.

COGNITIVE THEORY OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

- This theory was proposed by Jean Piaget. He theorized that language is made up of symbols and structures, but exhibits itself as a child's mental abilities mature.
- In addition, language is only one of many human mental or cognitive activities.
- Piaget's view of how children's minds work and develop has been enormously influential, particularly in educational theory.

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- His particular insight was the role of maturation (simply growing up) in children's increasing capacity to understand their world: they cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so. His research has spawned a great deal more, much of which has undermined the detail of his own, but like many other original investigators, his importance comes from his overall vision. (Wood, 1998).

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- Piaget proposed that children's thinking does not develop entirely smoothly: instead, there are certain points at which it "takes off" and moves into completely new areas and capabilities. He saw these transitions as taking place at about 18 months, 7 years and 11 or 12 years. This has been taken to mean that before these ages children are not capable (no matter how bright) of understanding things in certain ways, and has been used as the basis for scheduling the school curriculum. (Satterly, 1987).

THE 5 HYPOTHESES OF KRASHEN'S THEORY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- Krashen's theory of Second Language Acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:
- the **Acquisition-Learning** hypothesis;
- the **Monitor** hypothesis;
- the **Input** hypothesis;
- and the **Affective Filter** hypothesis;
- the **Natural Order** hypothesis.

THE ACQUISITION-LEARNING HYPOTHESIS

- The **Acquisition-Learning** distinction is the most fundamental of the five hypotheses in Krashen's theory and the most widely known among linguists and language teachers. According to Krashen there are two independent systems of foreign language performance: 'the acquired system' and 'the learned system'. The 'acquired system' or '**acquisition**' is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act.

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- The "learned system" or "**learning**" is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge 'about' the language, for example knowledge of grammar rules. A deductive approach in a teacher-centered setting produces "**learning**", while an inductive approach in a student-centered setting leads to "**acquisition**".

THE MONITOR HYPOTHESIS

- The **Monitor** hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. According to Krashen, the acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the 'monitor' or the 'editor'. The 'monitor' acts in a planning, editing and correcting function when three specific conditions are met:
 - The second language learners have sufficient time at their disposal.
 - They focus on form or think about correctness.
 - They know the rule.

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- It appears that the role of conscious learning is somewhat limited in second language performance. According to Krashen, the role of the monitor is minor, being used only to correct deviations from "normal" speech and to give speech a more 'polished' appearance.
- Krashen also suggests that there is individual variation among language learners with regard to 'monitor' use. He distinguishes those learners that use the 'monitor' all the time (over-users); those learners who have not learned or who prefer not to use their conscious knowledge (under-users); and those learners that use the 'monitor' appropriately (optimal users). An evaluation of the person's psychological profile can help to determine to what group they belong. Usually extroverts are under-users, while introverts and perfectionists are over-users. Lack of self-confidence is frequently related to the over-use of the "monitor".

THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

- The **Input** hypothesis is Krashen's attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language – how second language acquisition takes place. The Input hypothesis is only concerned with 'acquisition', not 'learning'. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses along the 'natural order' when he/she receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage 'i', then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to '**Comprehensible Input**' that belongs to level 'i + 1'. Since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Krashen suggests that *natural communicative input* is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some 'i + 1' input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence

THE AFFECTIVE FILTER HYPOTHESIS

- The **Affective Filter** hypothesis embodies Krashen's view that a number of 'affective variables' play a facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. These variables include: motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and personality traits. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and extroversion are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, anxiety, introversion and inhibition can raise the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is 'up' it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

NATURAL ORDER HYPOTHESIS

- **Natural Order** hypothesis is based on research findings (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Makino, 1980 cited in Krashen, 1987) which suggested that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a 'natural order' which is predictable. For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early while others late. This order seemed to be independent of the learners' age, L1 background, conditions of exposure, and although the agreement between individual acquirers was not always 100% in the studies, there were statistically significant similarities that reinforced the existence of a Natural Order of language acquisition. Krashen however points out that the implication of the natural order hypothesis is not that a language program syllabus should be based on the order found in the studies. In fact, he rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.

SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY

- A learning theory derived from the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky which deals with the role of social context in learning.
- Sociocultural theory emphasizes the central role that social relationships and participation in culturally organized practices play in learning. In second language learning research sociocultural theory emphasizes the role that social interaction plays in learning and the nature of language as a communicative activity rather than as a formal linguistic system.
- Second language learning is viewed as resulting from the sociocultural activities in which the learner participates.

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR (UG)

- The theory of Universal Grammar was proposed by Noam Chomsky. This theory which claims to account for the grammatical competence of every adult no matter what language he or she speaks.
- It claims that every speaker knows a set of **principles** which apply to all languages and also a set of parameters that can vary from one language to another, but only within certain limits.

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- According to UG theory, acquiring a language means applying the principles of UG grammar to a particular language, e.g. English, French or German, and learning which value is appropriate for each parameter.
- For example, one of the principles of UG is structure dependency. It means that a knowledge of language relies on knowing structural relationships in a sentence rather than looking at it as a sequence of words.

UG AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- The role of Universal Grammar (UG) in second language acquisition is still under discussion. Three possibilities are emerging:
- 1 UG operates in the same way for L2 as it does for L1.

The learner's knowledge of L1 is irrelevant.

- 2 The learner's Core Grammar is fixed and UG is no longer available to the L2 learner, particularly not to the adult learner.
- 3 UG is partly available but it is only one factor in the acquisition of L2. There are other factors and they may interfere with the UG influence.