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Noam chomsky child language acquisition theory

Share on PinterestHumans are storytelling beings. As far as we know, no other species has the capacity for language and ability to use it in endlessly creative ways. From our earliest days, we name and describe things. We tell others what’s happening around us. For people immersed in the study of language and the study of learning, one really important question has engendered a lot of debate over the years: How much of this ability is innate — part of our genetic makeup — and how much do we learn from our environments? There’s no doubt that we acquire our native languages, complete with their vocabularies and grammatical patterns. But is there an inherited ability underlying our individual languages — a structural framework that enables us to grasp, retain, and develop language so easily?In 1957, linguist Noam Chomsky published a groundbreaking book called “Syntactic Structures.” It proposed a novel idea: All human beings may be born with an innate understanding of how language works. Whether we learn Arabic, English, Chinese, or sign language is determined, of course, by the circumstances of our lives. But according to Chomsky, we can acquire language because we’re genetically encoded with a universal grammar — a basic understanding of how communication is structured. Chomsky’s idea has since become widely accepted.Chomsky and other linguists have said that all languages contain similar elements. For example, globally speaking, language breaks down into similar categories of words: nouns, verbs, and adjectives, to name three. Another shared characteristic of language is recursion. With rare exceptions, all languages use structures that repeat themselves, allowing us to expand those structures almost infinitely. For example, take the structure of a descriptor. In almost every known language, it’s possible to repeat descriptors over and over again: “She wore an itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka dot bikini.” Strictly speaking, more adjectives could be added to further describe that bikini, each embedded within the existing structure.The recursive property of language allows us to expand the sentence “She believed Ricky was innocent” almost endlessly: “Lucy believed that Fred and Ethel knew Ricky had insisted he was innocent.” The recursive property of language is sometimes called “nesting,” because in almost all languages, sentences can be expanded by placing repeating structures inside each other. Chomsky and others have argued that because almost all languages share these characteristics despite their other variations, we may be born preprogrammed with a universal grammar.We learn language almost effortlesslyLinguists like Chomsky have argued for a universal grammar in part because children everywhere develop language in very similar ways in short periods of time with little assistance.Children show awareness of language categories at extremely early ages, long before any overt instruction occurs. For example, one study showed that 18-month-old children recognized “a doke” referred to a thing and “praching” referred to an action, showing they understood the form of the word. Having the article “a” before it or ending with “-ing” determined whether the word was an object or an event.It’s possible they had learned these ideas from listening to people talk, but those who espouse the idea of a universal grammar say it’s more likely that they have an innate understanding of how words function, even if they don’t know the words themselves. And we learn in the same sequenceProponents of universal grammar say children the world over naturally develop language in the same sequence of steps. So, what does that shared developmental pattern look like? Many linguists agree that there are three basic stages: learning soundslearning wordslearning sentencesMore specifically:We perceive and produce speech sounds.We babble, usually with a consonant-then-vowel pattern.We speak our first rudimentary words.We grow our vocabularies, learning to classify things.We build two-word sentences, and then increase the complexity of our sentences.Different children proceed through these stages at different rates. But the fact that we all share the same developmental sequence may show we’re hardwired for language.We learn despite a “poverty of stimulus”Chomsky and others have also argued that we learn complex languages, with their intricate grammatical rules and limitations, without receiving explicit instruction. For example, children automatically grasp the correct way to arrange dependent sentence structures without being taught. We know to say “The boy who is swimming wants to eat lunch” instead of “The boy wants to eat lunch who is swimming.” Despite this lack of instructional stimulus, we still learn and use our native languages, understanding the rules that govern them. We wind up knowing a lot more about how our languages work than we’re ever overtly taught.Noam Chomsky is among the most oft-quoted linguists in history. Nevertheless, there’s been lots of debate around his universal grammar theory for over half a century now. One fundamental argument is that he’s got it wrong about a biological framework for language acquisition. Linguists and educators who differ with him say we acquire language the same way we learn everything else: through our exposure to stimuli in our environment. Our parents speak to us, whether verbally or using signs. We “absorb” language by listening to conversations taking place all around us, from the subtle corrections we receive for our linguistic errors. For instance, a child says, “I no want that.”Their caregiver responds, “You mean, ‘I don’t want that.’”But Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar doesn’t deal with how we learn our native languages. It’s focused on the innate capacity that makes all our language learning possible. A more fundamental criticism is that there are hardly any properties shared by all languages. Take recursion, for example. There are languages that simply aren’t recursive. And if the principles and parameters of language aren’t really universal, how could there be an underlying “grammar” programmed into our brains?One of the most practical outgrowths has been the idea that there’s an optimal age for language acquisition among children. The younger, the better is the prevailing idea. Since young children are primed for natural language acquisition, learning a second language may be more effective in early childhood. The universal grammar theory has also had a profound influence on classrooms where students are learning second languages. Many teachers now use more natural, immersive approaches that mimic the way we acquire our first languages, rather than memorizing grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. Teachers who understand universal grammar may also be better prepared to explicitly focus on the structural differences between students’ first and second languages. Noam Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar says that we’re all born with an innate understanding of the way language works. Chomsky based his theory on the idea that all languages contain similar structures and rules (a universal grammar), and the fact that children everywhere acquire language the same way, and without much effort, seems to indicate that we’re born wired with the basics already present in our brains. Although not everyone agrees with Chomsky’s theory, it continues to have a profound influence on how we think about language acquisition today. In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. By Henna Lemetyinen, published 2012Language is a cognition that truly makes us human. Whereas other species do communicate with an innate ability to produce a limited number of meaningful vocalizations (e.g. bonobos), or even with partially learned systems (e.g. bird songs), there is no other species known to date that can express infinite ideas (sentences) with a limited set of symbols (speech sounds and words).This ability is remarkable in itself. What makes it even more remarkable is that researchers are finding evidence for mastery of this complex skill in increasingly younger children.Infants as young as 12 months are reported to have sensitivity to the grammar needed to understand causative sentences (who did what to whom; e.g. the bunny pushed the frog (Rowland & Noble, 2010). After more than 60 years of research into child language development, the mechanism that enables children to segment syllables and words out of the strings of sounds they hear, and to acquire grammar to understand and produce language is still quite an enigma.Early TheoriesOne of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition was provided by Skinner (1957). As one of the pioneers of Behaviorism, he accounted for language development by means of environmental influence. Skinner argued that children learn language based on behaviorist reinforcement principles by associating words with meanings. Correct utterances are positively reinforced when the child realizes the communicative value of words and phrases. For example, when the child says ‘milk’ and the mother will smile and give her some as a result, the child will find this outcome rewarding, enhancing the child’s language development (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011).Universal GrammarHowever, Skinner’s account was soon heavily criticized by Noam Chomsky, the world’s most famous linguist to date. In the spirit of cognitive revolution in the 1950’s, Chomsky argued that children will never acquire the tools needed for processing an infinite number of sentences if the language acquisition mechanism was dependent on language input alone.Consequently, he proposed the theory of Universal Grammar: an idea of innate, biological grammatical categories, such as a noun category and a verb category that facilitate the entire language development in children and overall language processing in adults.Universal Grammar is considered to contain all the grammatical information needed to combine these categories, e.g. noun and verb, into phrases. The child’s task is just to learn the words of her language (Ambridge & Lieven).For example, according to the Universal Grammar account, children instinctively know how to combine a noun (e.g. a boy) and a verb (to eat) into a meaningful, correct phrase (A boy eats).This Chomskian (1965) approach to language acquisition has inspired hundreds of scholars to investigate the nature of these assumed grammatical categories and the research is still ongoing.Contemporary ResearchA decade or two later some psycho linguists began to question the existence of Universal Grammar. They argued that categories like noun and verb are biologically, evolutionarily and psychologically implausible and that the field called for an account that can explain for the acquisition process without innate categories.Researchers started to suggest that instead of having a language-specific mechanism for language processing, children might utilise general cognitive and learning principles.Whereas researchers approaching the language acquisition problem from the perspective of Universal Grammar argue for early full productivity, i.e. early adult-like knowledge of language, the opposing constructivist investigators argue for a more gradual developmental process. It is suggested that children are sensitive to patterns in language which enables the acquisition process.An example of this gradual pattern learning is morphology acquisition. Morphemes are the smallest grammatical markers, or units, in language that alter words. In English, regular plurals are marked with an -s morpheme (e.g. dog+s).Similarly, English third singular verb forms (she eat+s, a boy kick+s) are marked with the -s morpheme. Children are considered to acquire their first instances of third singular forms as entire phrasal chunks (Daddy kicks, a girl eats, a dog barks) without the ability of teasing the finest grammatical components apart.When the child hears a sufficient number of instances of a linguistic construction (i.e. the third singular verb form), she will detect patterns across the utterances she has heard. In this case, the repeated pattern is the -s marker in this particular verb form.As a result of many repetitions and examples of the -s marker in different verbs, the child will acquire sophisticated knowledge that, in English, verbs must be marked with an -s morpheme in the third singular form (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011; Pine, Conti-Ramsden, Joseph, Lieven & Serratrice, 2008; Theakson & Lieven, 2005). Approaching language acquisition from the perspective of general cognitive processing is an economical account of how children can learn their first language without an excessive biolinguistic mechanism.ConclusionHowever, finding a solid answer to the problem of language acquisition is far from being over. Our current understanding of the developmental process is still immature. Investigators of Universal Grammar are still trying to convince that language is a task too demanding to acquire without specific innate equipment, whereas the constructivist researchers are fiercely arguing for the importance of linguistic input.The biggest questions, however, are yet unanswered. What is the exact process that transforms the child’s utterances into grammatically correct, adult-like speech? How much does the child need to be exposed to language to achieve the adult-like state? What account can explain variation between languages and the language acquisition process in children acquiring very different languages to English? The mystery of language acquisition is granted to keep psychologists and linguists alike astonished a decade after decade. Download this article as a PDFHow to reference this article:Lemetyinen, H. (2012, October 24). Language acquisition. Simply Psychology. www.simplypsychology.org/language.htmlAPA Style ReferencesAmbridge, B., & Lieven, E.V.M. (2011). Language Acquisition: Contrasting theoretical approaches. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.Chomsky, N. (1965). Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. MIT Press.Pine, J.M., Conti-Ramsden, G., Joseph, K.L., Lieven, E.V.M., & Serratrice, L. (2008). Tense over time: testing the Agreement/Tense Omission Model as an account of the pattern of tense-marking provision in early child English. Journal of Child Language, 35(1): 55-75.Rowland, C. F., & Noble, C. L. (2010). 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