LANE 423 - APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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CHAPTER 2: FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Children have a remarkable ability to communicate:

- **Small babies:**
  o babble - coo – cry
  o vocally and non-vocally send & receive messages.
- **End of first year:**
  o start to imitate words & speech sounds
  o use their first words.
- **18 months:**
  o their vocabulary in terms of words has increased
  o beginning to use 2-word & 3-word "sentences" ("telegraphic" utterances).
    e.g. "bye-bye Daddy," "gimme toy"

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- **2 years:**
  o comprehending more sophisticated language
  o start forming questions and negatives
    e.g. "where my toy? " and "That not red, that blue"
- **3 years:**
  o can comprehend an incredible quantity of linguistic input
  o chatter nonstop
    "Is this where you get safe? Cause this is Safeway and you get safe from the cold." [3 year-old in a Safeway supermarket]

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- **School age:**
  o start to internalize increasingly complex structures
  o expand their vocabulary
  o sharpen their communicative skills
  o not only learn what to say, but what *not* to say (learn the social functions of their language)

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How can we explain this fantastic journey

- From that first anguished cry at birth to adult competence in a language?
- From the first word to tens of thousands?
- From telegraphese at 18 months to the compound-complex, cognitively precise, sociocturally appropriate sentences just a few short years later?

These are the sorts of questions that theories of language acquisition attempt to answer.

Theories of First language Acquisition

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An extreme **behaviortistic** position would claim that:

- Children come into this world with a *tabula rasa* (a clean slate bearing no preconceived notions about the world or about language)

- these children are then shaped by the environment and slowly conditioned through various schedules of reinforcement.

Theories of First language Acquisition   cont.

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The rationalist/cognitivist claim that:

- children come into this world with very **specific innate knowledge**, predispositions, and biological timetables.

At the other **constructivist** extreme is the position that claims that

- children learn to function in a language chiefly through interaction and discourse.

Theories of First language Acquisition   cont.

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These positions represent opposites on a continuum, with many possible positions in between.

Theories of First language Acquisition   cont.

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Three Positions in First Language Acquisition

- The Behavioristic Approaches

- The Nativist Approach

- The Functional Approaches

Behavioristic Approaches

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They focused on:

- the clear noticeable aspects of linguistic behavior

- the publicly observable responses

- the relationships between those responses + events in the world surrounding them.
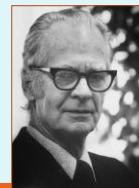
Behavioristic Approaches   cont.

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- An effective language behavior = production of correct responses to stimuli

- If a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual, or conditioned.

- Traditional behaviorists believed that language learning is the result of imitation, practice, feedback on success, and habit formation.

Behavioristic Approaches   cont.

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- One of the best-known attempts to construct a behavioristic model of linguistic behavior was embodied in B.F. Skinner's classic, *Verbal Behavior* (1957).

Behavioristic Approaches   cont.
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- Operant conditioning refers to conditioning in which the organism (a human being) sends out a response, or operant (a sentence or utterance), without necessarily observable stimuli;
- that operant is maintained (learned) by reinforcement (e.g. a positive verbal or nonverbal response from another person).
- If a child says "want milk" and a parent gives the child some milk, the operant is reinforced and, over repeated instances, is conditioned.

Behavioristic Approaches   cont.
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According to Skinner, verbal behavior, like other behavior, is controlled by its consequences.

- When consequences are **rewarding**, behavior is maintained and is increased in strength and perhaps frequency.
- When consequences are punishing, or when there is a total lack of reinforcement, the behavior is weakened and eventually extinguished.

Behavioristic Approaches   cont.
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- Skinner's theories attracted a number of critics - Noam Chomsky (1959)

- but it also had people who defended it - Kenneth MacCorquodale (1970)

Behavioristic Approaches   cont.
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- Today, virtually no one would agree that Skinner's model of verbal behavior adequately accounts for the capacity to acquire language and for language development itself.
- The behavioristic views failed to explain the fact that almost every sentence you speak or write is novel, never before uttered either by you or by anyone else!
- These novel utterances are even created by very young children as they "play" with language, and that same creativity continues on into adulthood and throughout one's life.

Behavioristic Approaches   cont.
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- It would appear that this position with its emphasis on empirical observation and the scientific method only began to explain the miracle of language acquisition.

- It left untouched genetic and interactionist domains that could be explored only by approaches that investigated them more deeply.

The Nativist Approach
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The term *nativist* is derived from the fundamental assertion that:

- language acquisition is innately determined
- that we are born with a genetic capacity that predisposes us to a systematic perception of language around us, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language

The Nativist Approach   cont.

Eric Lenneberg (1967) proposed that certain modes of perception and other language related mechanisms are biologically determined.
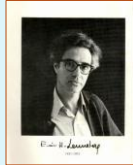
The Nativist Approach   cont.

Chomsky (1965) similarly claimed that:

- the existence of innate properties of language to explain the child's mastery of a native language in such a short time despite the highly abstract nature of the rules of language.
- This innate knowledge, according to Chomsky, is embodied in a "little black box", a **language acquisition device (LAD).**

The Nativist Approach   cont.

The Language Acquisition Device (LAD)

- An imaginary "black box" that exists in the brain.
- It contains *all* and *only* the principles which are universal to all human languages.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

- For the LAD to work, the child needs to access only samples of a natural language. These language samples serve as a trigger to activate the device.

- Once it is activated, the child is able to discover the structure of the language to be learned by matching the innate knowledge of basic grammatical relationships to the structures of the particular language in the environment.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

McNeill (1966) described LAD as consisting of four innate linguistic properties:

1. the ability to distinguish speech sounds from other sounds in the environment
2. the ability to organize linguistic data into various classes that can later be refined;
3. knowledge that only a certain kind of linguistic system is possible and that other kinds are not
4. the ability to engage in constant evaluation of the developing linguistic system so as to construct the simplest possible system out of the available linguistic input.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

- McNeill and other Chomskyan followers composed many arguments for the appropriateness of the LAD proposition, especially in contrast to behavioristic, **stimulus-response** (S-R) theory, which was so limited in accounting for the creativity present in child language.

- Even though it was recognized that the LAD was not literally a cluster of brain cells that could be isolated and neurologically located, such inquiry stimulated a great deal of fruitful research.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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More recently, researchers in the nativist tradition have continued this line of inquiry through a genre of child language acquisition research that focuses on what has come to be known as Universal Grammar.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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One of the more practical contributions of nativist theories is evident if you look at the kinds of discoveries that have been made about how the system of child language works.

- Research has shown that the child's language, at any given point, is a legitimate system in its own right.

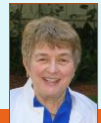## The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- The child's linguistic development is
  - not a process of developing fewer and fewer "incorrect" structures,
  - not a language in which earlier stages have more "mistakes" than later stages.

- Rather, the child's language at any stage is systematic in that the child is constantly:
  - **forming** hypotheses on the basis of the input received
  - and then **testing** those hypotheses in speech (and comprehension).
  - As the child's language develops, those hypotheses are continually **revised**, **reshaped**, or sometimes **abandoned**.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- Jean Berko (1958) demonstrated that children learn language not as a series of separate discrete items, but as an integrated system.
- Using a simple nonsense-word test (Wug Test) , Berko discovered that English-speaking children as young as four years of age applied rules for the formation of plural, present progressive, past tense, third singular, and possessives.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- In the test, children are shown drawings of imaginary creatures with novel names or people performing mysterious actions.
- For example, they are told, "Here is a wug. Now there are two of them. There are two.......". or "Here is a man who knows how to bod. Yesterday he did the same thing. Yesterday, he.............".
- By completing these sentences with 'wugs' and 'bodded', children demonstrate that they know rules for the formation of plural and simple past in English.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- By generalizing these patterns to words they have never heard before, they show that their language is not just a list of memorized word pairs such as 'book/books' and 'nod/nodded'
- If a child saw one "wug" he could easily talk about two "wugs;'
- or if he were presented with a person who knows how to "gling," the child could talk about a person who "glinged" yesterday, or sometimes who "glang."

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- Nativist studies of child language acquisition were free to construct hypothetical grammars of child language, although such grammars were still solidly based on empirical data.
- Linguists started to examine child language from early one- and two-word forms of "telegraphic" to the complex language of five- to ten-year-olds.
- The early grammars of child language were referred to as pivot grammars.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- It was commonly observed that the child's first two-word utterances seemed to manifest two separate word classes, and not simply two words thrown together at random.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- Consider the following utterances:
  - My cap
  - My horsie
  - All gone
- Linguists noted that the words on the left-hand side seemed to belong to a class that words on the right-hand side generally did not belong to.
- That is, my could co-occur with cap, horsie, gone, or sock, but not with that or all

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O	P + O	O + P	O + O
Daddy Hi Byebye	See boy	Shoe off	Mommy sleep Milk cup Baby sit.
	See sock	Shirt off	
	Pretty boat	Daddy do	
	Pretty fan	Mommy do	
	My Mommy	Blanket away	
	My milk	Daddy away.	
	Allgone shoe		
	Allgone egg		
	More taxi		
	More melon		

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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- The first class of words was called "pivot," since they could pivot around a number of words in the second, "open" class.
- The first rule of the generative " grammar of the child was described as follows:
- Sentence –> Pivot word + Open word
- The child has a small repertoire of pivot words which can be placed first in the phrase "more juice" or second in the phrase "socks off".
- The term *pivot* refers to the fact these words can be used in conjunction with almost any other word, which the child has learnt, to convey the child's intending meaning.

The Nativist Approach   cont.

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All of these approaches within the **nativist** framework have made at least three important contributions to our understanding of the L1 acquisition process:

- Freedom from the restrictions of the so-called "scientific method" to explore the unseen, unobservable, underlying, abstract linguistic structures being developed in the child;
- Systematic description of the child's linguistic repertoire as either rule-governed or operating out of parallel distributed processing capacities;
- The construction of a number of potential properties of Universal Grammar.

Functional Approaches

More recently, with an increase in constructivist perspectives on the study of language, there has been a shift in patterns of research. The shift has not been so much away from the cognitive side of the continuum, but perhaps better described as a move even more deeply into the essence of language.

Functional Approaches   cont.

1. Researchers began to see that language was just one manifestation of the cognitive and affective ability to deal with the world, with others, and with the self.

Functional Approaches   cont.

2. Moreover, the generative rules that were proposed under the nativist framework dealt specifically with:

- the **forms** of language
  - o **Forms** (e.g. morphemes, words, sentences, and the rules that govern them.)
- and not with the deeper **functional** levels of meaning constructed from social interaction.
  - o **Functions** (i.e. The meaningful, interactive purposes, within a social (pragmatic) context, that we accomplish with the forms.)

Cognition and Language Development

The first social constructivist emphasis of the functional perspective was on Cognition and Language Development

Cognition & Language Development   cont.

Lois Bloom (1971) criticized pivot grammar:

- the relationships in which words occur in telegraphic utterances are only superficially similar.
- For example, in the utterance "Mommy sock," which nativists would describe as a sentence consisting of a pivot word and an open word, Bloom found at least three possible underlying relations:
  - o agent-action (Mommy is putting the sock on),
  - o agent-object (Mommy sees the sock),
  - o and possessor-possessed (Mommy's sock).
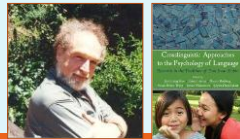
Cognition & Language Development   cont.

- Bloom concluded that children learn underlying structures, and not superficial word order.
- Thus, depending on the social context, "Mommy sock" could mean a number of different things to a child.
- Those varied meanings were inadequately captured in a pivot grammar approach.

Cognition & Language Development   cont.

Dan Slobin (1971, 1986, 1997), among others, demonstrated that:

- in all languages, semantic learning depends on cognitive development
- sequences of development are determined more by **semantic complexity** than by **structural complexity**.

Cognition & Language Development   cont.

There are two major views to language development (involved with the poles of **functions** and **forms**):

1. On the functional level, development is measured by:
   - the growth of **conceptual** and communicative capacities,
   - operating in conjunction with innate schemas of **cognition**;

2. On the formal level, development is measured by:
   - the growth of **perceptual** and information-processing capacities,
   - operating in conjunction with innate schemas of **grammar**.
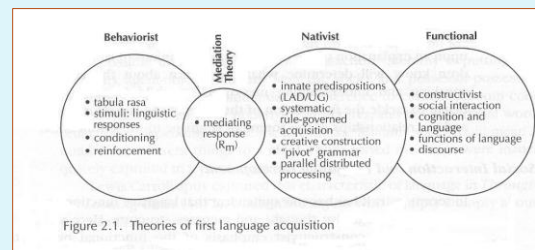
Social Interaction & Language Development

The second social constructivist emphasis of the functional perspective was on Social Interaction & Language Development .

Please read pp. 34-35.

Summary

Figure 2.1. Theories of first language acquisition

Issues in First Language Acquisition

- Competence and Performance
- Comprehension and Production
- Nature or Nurture?
- Universals
- Systematicity and Variability
- Language and Thought
- Imitation
- Practice and Frequency
- Input
- Discourse

Competence & Performance

Competence:
- It refers to one's underlying knowledge of a system, event, or fact.
- It is the non-observable *ability* to do something, to perform something.

Performance:
- It is the overtly observable and concrete manifestation or realization of competence.
- It is the *actual doing* of something: walking, singing, dancing, speaking.

Competence & Performance   cont.

In reference to language,

- **Competence** is one's underlying knowledge of the system of a language-its rules of grammar, its vocabulary, all the pieces of a language and how those pieces fit together.
- **Performance** is the actual production (speaking, writing) or the comprehension (listening, reading) of linguistic events.

Competence & Performance   cont.

- Chomsky (1965) likened competence to an "idealized" speaker-hearer.
- This idealized person does not display:
  - performance variables (e.g. memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors,)
  - hesitation phenomena (e.g. repeats, false starts, pauses, omissions, and additions.)

Competence & Performance   cont.

How could one scientifically assess this unobservable, underlying level?

- Brown and Bellugi (1964) give us a rather delightful example of the difficulty of attempting to extract underlying grammatical knowledge from children.
- Unlike adults, who can be asked, for example, whether it is better to say "two foots" or "two feet," children exhibit what is called the " pop-go-weasel" effect, as witnessed in the following dialogue between an adult and a two-year old child:

  ADULT: Now Adam, listen to what I say. Tell me which is better to say ... *some water*, or *a water*.

  ADAM: Pop go weasel.

Competence & Performance   cont.

- The child obviously has no interest in – or understanding of – the adult's grammatical interrogation and therefore says whatever he wants to!
- The researcher is thus forced to invent indirect methods of judging competence.
- Among those methods are:
  - the tape recording and transcription of countless hours of speech followed by an extensive analysis
  - the direct admission of certain imitation, production, or comprehension tests,
  all with numerous disadvantages

Competence & Performance   cont.

- How is one, for example, to infer some general competence about the linguistic system of a five-year-old, monolingual, English-speaking girl whose recounting of an incident viewed on television is transcribed below:

... they heared 'em underground ca-cause they went through a hoyle – a hole – and they pulled a rock from underground and then they saw a wave going in – that the hole – and they brought a table and the wave brought 'em out the k-tunnel and then the – they went away and then – uh – m – ah – back on top and it was – uh – going under a bridge and they went – then the braves hit the – the bridge – they – all of it – th-then they looked there – then they – then they were safe.

Competence & Performance   cont.

- On the surface it might appear that this child is severely impaired in her attempts to communicate.
- In fact, we usually comprehend such strings of speech very well by focusing on the underlying meaning of the utterance and by not allowing ourselves to be distracted by a number of performance variables.

Competence & Performance   cont.

- If we were to record many more samples of girl's speech, we would still be faced with the problem of **inferring her competence**. What is her knowledge of the verb system? of the concept of a "sentence"?
- Even if we make tests of comprehension or production to a child, we are still left with the problem of **inferring**, as accurately as possible, the child's underlying competence.
- Often these inferences are mere guesses, and what research is all about is converting the guesswork to accurate measurement

Competence & Performance   cont.

- Adult talk is not any better, as we can see in the following word-for-word transcription of comments made on a talk show by golfer Tony Jacklin:

Concentration is important. But uh – I also – to go with this of course if you're playing well – if you're playing well then you get up tight about your game. You get keyed up and it's easy to concentrate. You know you're playing well and you know ... in with a chance than it's easier, much easier to – to you know get in there and – and start to ... you don't have to think about it. I mean it's got to be automatic.

Competence & Performance   cont.

Criticism of the competence-performance model:

- Major criticisms of the model focus on the notion that competence, as defined by Chomsky, consists of the abilities of an "idealized" hearer-speaker who does not make any performance variables.
- Stubbs (1996), reviewing the issue, reminded us of the position of British linguists Firth and Halliday: dualisms are unnecessary, and the **only option for linguists is to study language in use**.

Comprehension and Production

- Not to be confused with the competence/performance distinction, **comprehension** and **production** can be aspects of *both* performance *and* competence.
- One of the myths that has crept into some foreign language teaching materials is that:
  - comprehension (listening, reading) = competence ✖
  - production (speaking, writing) = performance. ✖
- It is important to recognize that this is not the case: production is of course more directly observable, but comprehension is as much performance as production is.

Comprehension and Production   cont.

- In child language, most observational and research evidence points to the general superiority of comprehension over production: children seem to understand "more" than they actually produce.
- For instance, a child may understand a sentence with an embedded relative in it (e.g., "The ball that's in the sandbox is red") but not be able to produce one.

Comprehension and Production   cont.

- W. R. Miller (1963, p. 863) gave us a good example of this phenomenon in phonological development: "Recently a three-year-old child told me her name was Litha. I answered 'Litha?' 'No, Litha: 'Oh, Lisa.' 'Yes, Litha."
- The child clearly perceived the contrast between English's [s] and [θ], even though she could not produce the contrast herself.

Comprehension and Production   cont.

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- We know that even adults:
  - understand more vocabulary than they ever use in speech
  - perceive more syntactic variation than they actually produce.

Comprehension and Production   cont.

(62)

- How are we to explain this difference between comprehension and production?
- Could it be that the same competence accounts for both modes of performance (production and comprehension)?
- Or can we speak of comprehension competence and production competence?
- Because comprehension for the most part runs ahead of production, is it more completely indicative of our overall competence?
- Is production indicative of a smaller portion of competence?

Comprehension and Production   cont.

(63)

- A theory of language must include some accounting, of the separation of two types of competence.
- In fact, linguistic competence no doubt has several modes or levels, at least as many as four, since speaking, listening, reading, and writing are all separate modes of performance.

Comprehension and Production   cont.

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- Perhaps an even more compelling argument for the separation of competencies comes from research that appears to support the superiority of production over comprehension.
- Gathercole (1988) reported on a number of studies in which children were able to produce certain aspects of language they could not comprehend.
- For example, Rice (1980) found that children who did not previously know terms for color were
  - able to respond verbally to such questions as "What color is this?"
  - not able to respond correctly (by giving the correct colored object) to "Give me the [color] one."

Comprehension and Production   cont.

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- While lexical and grammatical instances of production-before-comprehension seem to be few in number, they still prevent us from concluding that *all* aspects of linguistic comprehension precede, or facilitate, linguistic production.

Nature or Nurture?

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- Nativists argued that a child is born with an innate knowledge of or predisposition toward language, and that this innate property (the LAD or UG) is universal in all human beings.
- The innateness hypothesis was a possible resolution of the contradiction between the behavioral notion that language is a set of habits that can be acquired by a process of conditioning and the fact that such conditioning is much too slow and inefficient to account for the acquisition of a phenomenon as complex as language.

Nature or Nurture? cont.

(67)

- Environmental factors cannot be ignored.
- For years linguists, psychologists, and educators have been caught up in the "nature-nurture" controversy:
  - What are those behaviors that "nature" provides innately, in some sort of predetermined biological timetable,
  - and what are those behaviors that are, by environmental exposure – by "nurture," by teaching – learned and internalized?

Nature or Nurture? cont.

(68)

- An interesting line of research on innateness was pursued by Derek Bickerton (1981), who found evidence, across a number of languages, of common patterns of linguistic and cognitive development.
- He proposed that human beings are "bio-programmed" to proceed from stage to stage.

Nature or Nurture? cont.

(69)

- Like flowering plants, people are innately programmed to "release" certain properties of language at certain developmental ages.
- Just as you can not make a geranium bloom before its "time," so human beings will "bloom" in predetermined, preprogrammed steps.

Universals

(70)

Universals

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- Closely related to the innateness controversy is the claim that language is universally acquired in the same manner, and moreover, that the deep structure of language at its deepest level may be common to all languages.
- Research on UG continues to this day.
- One of the keys to such inquiry lies in research on child language acquisition across many different languages in order to determine the commonalities.

Universals cont.

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- Slobin (1986, 1992, 1997) and his colleagues gathered data on language acquisition in, among others, Japanese, French, Spanish, German, Polish, Hebrew, and Turkish.
- Interesting universals of pivot grammar and other telegraphese emerged.
- Maratsos (1988) listed some of the universal linguistic categories under investigation by a number of different researchers: word order, morphological marking tone, agreement (e.g., of subject and verb), reduced reference (e.g., pronouns, ellipsis), nouns and noun classes, verbs and verb classes, predication, negation, and question formation.

Universals   cont.

- Much of current UG research is centered around what have come to be known as **principles** and **parameters**.
- Principles are invariable characteristics of human language that apply to all languages universally.
- Cook (1997, pp. 250-251) offered a simple analogy:
  o Rules of the road in driving universally require the driver to keep to one side of the road; this is a principle.
  o But in some countries you must keep to the left (e.g. UK & Japan) and in others keep to the right (e.g. USA & Taiwan); this is a parameter.

Systematicity and Variability

- One of the assumptions of many current researches on child language is the *systematicity* of the process of acquisition**.**
- From pivot grammar to three- and four-word utterances, and to full sentences of almost indeterminate length, children exhibit a remarkable ability to infer the phonological, structural, lexical, and semantic system of language.

Systematicity and Variability   cont.

- Ever since Berko's (1958) "wug" study, we have been discovering more and more about the systematicity of the acquisition process.
- But in the midst of all this systematicity, there is an equally remarkable amount of **variability** in the process of learning!
- researchers do not agree on how to define various "stages" of language acquisition. even in English.
- Certain "typical" patterns appear in child language.

Systematicity and Variability   cont.

For example,

- it has been found that young children who have not yet mastered the past-tense morpheme (-ed) tend first to **learn past tenses as separate items** ("walked," "broke," "drank") without knowledge of the difference between regular and irregular verbs.
- Then, around the age of 4 or 5, they begin to perceive a system in which **the -ed morpheme is added to a verb**, and at this point all verbs become regularized ("breaked," "drinked," "goed").

Systematicity and Variability   cont.

- Finally, after school age, children perceive that there are two classes of verbs, regular and irregular, and begin to **sort out verbs into the two classes**, a process that goes on for many years and in some cases persists into young adulthood.

Language and Thought

- For years researchers have investigated the relationship between language and cognition.
- The behavioral view that cognition is too mentalistic to be studied by the scientific method is the opposite of such positions as that of Piaget (1972).
- Piaget claimed that cognitive development is at the very center of the human organism and that language is dependent upon and springs from cognitive development**.**

Language and Thought   cont.

- Others emphasized the influence of language on cognitive development.
- Jerome Bruner (Bruner, Olver, & Greenfield, 1966), for example, talked about:
  o intellectual development caused by language
  o words shaping concepts
  o dialogues between parent and child or teacher and child serving to orient and educate

Language and Thought   cont.

- Vygotsky (1962, 1978) also differed from Piaget in claiming that social interaction, through language, is a prerequisite to cognitive development.
- **Thought** and **language** were seen as two distinct cognitive operations that grow together (Schinke-Llano 1993).
- As demonstrated in Vygotsky's **Zone of Proximal Development** (ZPD), every child reaches his or her potential development through social interaction with adults and peers.

Language and Thought   cont.

- One of the champions of the position that language affects thought was Benjamin Whorf, who with Edward Sapir formed the well-known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of *linguistic relativity*.
- Namely, that each language imposes on its speaker a particular "world view."

Edward Sapir

Benjamin Whorf

Language and Thought   cont.

- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (SWH) (also known as the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis) suggests a systematic relationship between the language a person speaks and how that person both understands the world and behaves in it.
- The hypothesis suggests that:
  o a particular language's nature influences the habitual thought of its speakers
  o different language patterns yield different patterns of thought

Language and Thought   cont.

Example:

- The Inuit have many words for snow because it is so crucial to their everyday lives. In addition, the Inuit actually see snow differently from others whose lives are not as dependent on snow. Whereas English speakers simply see it as solid white stuff.
- This was criticized by saying that while other languages might not have as many words for the different varieties of snow as the Inuit has, but they allow their speakers to perceive these varieties using phrases and adjectives (e.g. fluffy, slushy, and so forth)

Language and Thought   cont.

Example:

- The Arabic language doesn't have a single word for *compromise*, which some has said is the reason that Arabs seem to be unable to reach a compromise!!!
- Yet the Arabic language does provide several ways to articulate the concept of compromise, the most common is an expression that translates in English to "we reached a middle ground" (Nunberg, 2003).

Geoffrey Nunberg

Language and Thought   cont.

The issue at stake in child language acquisition is to determine:

- how thought affects language,
- how language affects thought,
- and how linguists can best describe and account for the interaction of the two.

Imitation

- It is a common, informal observation that children are good imitators
- We think of children typically as imitators and mimics, and then conclude that imitation is one of the important strategies a child uses in the acquisition of language
- That conclusion is not inaccurate on a global level. Indeed, research has shown that echoing is :
  - an important strategy in early language learning
  - an important aspect of early phonological acquisition.
- Moreover, imitation matches well with **behavioral** principles of language acquisition- principles relevant, at least, to the earliest stages.

Imitation   cont.

There are two types of imitation:

- Surface structure imitation: where a person repeats or mimics the surface strings, attending to a phonological code rather than a semantic code.
- Deep structure imitation: where a person concentrates on language as a meaningful and communicative tool.

Imitation   cont.

Surface structure imitation

- It is this level of imitation that enables an adult to repeat random numbers or nonsense syllables, or even to mimic unknown languages.
- The semantic data, if any, underlying the surface output are neither internalized nor attended to.
- In foreign language classes, rote pattern drills often evoke surface imitation: a repetition of sounds by the student without understanding of what the sounds might possibly mean.

Imitation   cont.

- The earliest stages of child language acquisition may manifest a good deal of **surface imitation** since the baby may not possess the necessary semantic categories to assign "meaning" to utterances.

Deep structure imitation

- But as children perceive the importance of the semantic level of language, they attend primarily if not exclusively to that **meaningful semantic level** – the deep structure of language.

Imitation   cont.

- They engage in deep-structure imitation. In fact, the imitation of the deep structure of language can literally block their attention to the surface structure so that they become, on the face of it, poor imitators.

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Imitation   cont.

Consider the following conversation as recorded by McNeill (1966):

Child:	Nobody don't like me
Mother:	No, say, "Nobody likes me."
Child:	Nobody don't like me.

[Eight repetitions of this dialogue]

Mother:	No, now listen carefully: say, "Nobody likes me."
Child:	Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

Imitation   cont.

- You can imagine the frustration of both mother and child, for
  - the mother was attending to and focusing on **surface grammatical distinction**,
  - but the child was attending to and focus on the **meaning value**.
  - Finally the child perceived some sort of surface distinction between what she was saying and what her mother was saying and made what she thought was an appropriate change "Oh! Nobody don't likes me."

Imitation   cont.

- A similar case occurred one day when the teacher of an elementary school class asked her students to write a few sentences on a piece of paper, to which one rather shy student responded,

  "Ain't got no pencil." = I have not got no pencil
- Disturbed at this nonstandard response, the teacher embarked on a barrage of corrective models for the child: "I don't have *any* pencils, you don't have a pencil, they don't have pencils.
- When the teacher finally ended her monologue of patterns, the intimidated and confused child said, "Ain't *nobody* got no pencils?" = Haven't nobody got no pencils?

Imitation   cont.

- The teacher's purpose was lost on this child because he too was attending to language as a meaningful and communicative tool and not to the question of whether certain forms were "correct" and others were not.
- The child, like all children, was attending to the **truth value** of the utterance.

Imitation   cont.

- Research has also shown that children, when directly asked to repeat a sentence in a test situation, will often repeat the correct underlying deep structure with a change in the surface.

For example, sentences such as:

- "The ball that is rolling down the hill is black"
- "The boy who's in the sandbox is wearing a red shirt"

tend to be repeated back by preschool children as

- "The black ball is rolling down the hill"
- "The red boy is in the sandbox".

Practice and Frequency

- Do children practice their language? If so, how? What is the role of the **frequency** of hearing and producing items in the acquisition of those items?
- It is common to observe children and conclude that they "practice" language constantly, especially in the early stages of single-word and two-word utterances.
- A behavioral model of L1 acquisition would claim that practice (repetition and association) is the key to the formation of habits by **operant conditioning**.

Practice and Frequency   cont.

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- One unique form of practice by a child is recorded by Ruth Weir (1962).
- She found that her children produced rather long monologues in bed at night before going to sleep.
- Here is one example: "What color ... What color blanket ... What color mop ... What color glass ... Mommy's home sick ... Mommy's home sick ... Where's Mommy home sick ... Where's Mikey sick ... Mikey sick."
- Such monologues are not uncommon among children, who tend to "play" with language just as they do with all objects and events around them.
- Children's practice seems to be a key to language acquisition.

Practice and Frequency   cont.

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- Practice is usually thought of as referring to speaking only. But one can also think in terms of comprehension practice, (the frequency of linguistic input to the child.)
- Is the acquisition of particular words or structures directly attributable to their frequency in the child's linguistic environment?
- There is evidence that certain highly frequent forms are acquired first. Like what?
- Like questions, irregular past-tense forms, certain common household items and persons.

Practice and Frequency   cont.

99

- Brown and Hanlon (1970), for example, found that the frequency of occurrence of a linguistic item in the speech of mothers was an overwhelmingly strong predictor of the order of emergence of those items in their children's speech.

Practice and Frequency   cont.

100

- The frequency issue may be summed up by noting that nativists who claim that the frequency of stimuli is of little importance in language acquisition might, in the face of evidence now available, be more cautious in their claims.
- It would appear that frequency of *meaningful* occurrence may well be a more precise refinement of the notion of frequency.

Input

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- The role of input in the child's acquisition of language is undeniably crucial.
- Whatever one's position is on the innateness of language, the speech that young children hear is primarily the speech heard in the home, and much of that speech is parental speech or the speech of older siblings.

Input   cont.

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Linguists once claimed that:

- most adult speech is basically semigrammatical (full of performance variables),
- children are exposed to a chaotic sample of language that can not properly instruct them on grammar.
- only their innate capacities can account for their successful acquisition of language.

Input   cont.

- However, Labov (1970) studies showed that the presumed ungrammaticality of everyday speech appears to be a myth.
- Bellugi and Brown (1964) and Drach (1969) found that the speech addressed to children was carefully grammatical and lacked the usual hesitations and false starts common in adult-to-adult speech.
- Landes's (1975) summary of a wide range of research on parental input supported their conclusions.

William Labov

Input   cont.

- At the same time, we should remember :
  - that children react very consistently to the **deep structure** and the communicative function of language,
  - and they do not react overtly to grammatical corrections as in the "nobody likes me" dialogue.
- Such input is largely ignored unless there is some truth or falsity that the child can attend to.
- Thus, if a child says "Dat Harry" and the parent says "No, that's *John*, " the child might readily self-correct and say "Oh, dat *John*."

Input   cont.

- But what Landes (1975) and others showed is that in the long run children will, after consistent, repeated models in meaningful contexts, eventually transfer correct forms to their own speech and thus correct "dat" to "that's."

Input   cont.

- The importance of the issue lies in the fact that it is clear from more recent research that adult and peer input to the child is far more important than nativists earlier might have believed.
- Adult input seems to shape the child's acquisition, and the interaction patterns between child and parent change according to the increasing language skill of the child.
- Nurture and environment in this case are very important.

Discourse

- A subfield of research that is occupying the attention of an increasing number of child language researchers is the area of **conversational** or **discourse analysis**.
- While parental input is a significant part of the child's development of conversational rules, it is only one aspect, as the child also interacts with peers and, of course, with other adults.

Discourse   cont.

- Berko-Gleason (1982) described the perspective:

"While it used to be generally held that mere *exposure* to language is sufficient to set the child's language generating machinery in motion, it is now clear that, in order for successful L1 acquisition to take place, *interaction*, rather than exposure, is required; children do not learn language from overhearing the conversations of others or from listening to the radio, and must, instead, acquire it in the context of being spoken to."

Discourse   cont.

- While conversation is a universal human activity performed routinely in the course of daily living, the means by which children learn to take part in conversation appear to be very complex.
- Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) proposed that conversations be examined in terms of **initiations** and **responses**.
- The child learns not only how to initiate a conversation but how to respond to another's initiating utterance.
- Questions are not simply questions but are recognized functionally as requests for information, for action, or for help.

Discourse   cont.

- At a relatively young age, children learn that utterances have both a literal and an intended or functional meaning.

- Thus, in the case of a question "Can you go to the movies tonight?," the response "I'm busy," is understood correctly as a negative response ("I can't go to the movies").

Discourse   cont.

- How do children manifest the development of discourse rules?
- What are the key features the child attends to?
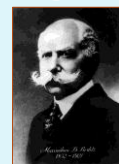- How do they detect pragmatic and intended meaning?
- How are gender roles acquired?

  These and other questions about the acquisition of discourse ability are being researched.

The Direct Method

Francois Gouin   Maximilian Berlitz

- were the first two reformers of modern language teaching.
- Their perspective observations about language teaching helped set the stage for the development of language teaching methodologies for the century following.

The Direct Method   cont.

Francois Gouin's story

In his *The Art of Learning and Studying Foreign Languages* (1880), François Gouin described a painful set of experiences that finally led to his insights about language teaching. Having decided in his midlife to learn German, he took up residency in Hamburg for one year. But rather than attempting to converse with the natives he engaged in a rather bizarre sequence of attempts to "master" the language. Upon arrival in Hamburg he felt he should *memorize* a German grammar book and a table of the *248* irregular German verbs!

The Direct Method   cont.

He did this in a matter of only *ten* days and then hurried to "the academy" (the university) to test his new knowledge. "But alas!" he wrote, I could not understand a single word, not a single word!" Gouin was undaunted. He returned to the isolation of his room, this time to memorize the German roots and to rememorize the grammar book and irregular verbs. Again he emerged with expectations of success. "But alas! " – the result was the same as before.

The Direct Method   cont.

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In the course of the year in Germany Gouin memorized books, translated Goethe and Schiller, and even memorized 30,000 words in a German dictionary – all in the isolation of his room, only to be crushed by his failure to understand German afterwards. Only once did he try to "make conversation" as a method, but this caused people to laugh at him and he was too embarrassed to continue that method. At the end of the year, Gouin, having reduced the classical method to absurdity, was forced to return home, a failure.

The Direct Method   cont.

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But there is a happy ending. Upon returning home Gouin discovered that his three-year-old nephew had, during that year, gone through that wonderful stage of *first* language acquisition in which he went from saying virtually nothing at all to become a real chatterbox of French. How was it that this little child succeeded so easily in a task, mastering a L1, that Gouin, in a second language, had found impossible? The child must hold the secret to learning a language! So Gouin spent a great deal of time observing his nephew and other children and came to the following conclusions:

The Direct Method   cont.

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Gouin's conclusions:
- Language learning is primarily a matter of transforming perceptions into conceptions.
- Children use language to represent their conceptions.
- Language is a means of thinking, of representing the world to oneself.

These insights, remember, are being formed by a language teacher over a century ago!

The Direct Method   cont.

(118)

- So Gouin set about devising a teaching method that would follow from these insights.
- And thus the **Series Method** was created,
- a method that taught learners:
  - o directly (without translation)
  - o conceptually (without grammatical rules and explanations)
  - a "series" of connected sentences that are easy to perceive.

The Direct Method   cont.

(119)

- The first lesson of a foreign language would thus teach the following series of *15* sentences:
  - o I walk toward the door. I draw near to the door. I draw nearer to the door. I get to the door. I stop at the door.
  - o I stretch out my arm. I take hold of the handle. I turn the handle. I open the door. I pull the door.
  - o The door moves. The door turns on its hinges. The door turns and turns. I open the door wide. I let go of the handle.

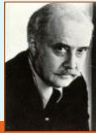### The Direct Method   cont.

(120)

- The 15 sentences have a large number of grammatical properties, vocabulary items, word orders, and complexity.
- Gouin was successful with such lessons because the language was so easily understood, stored, recalled, and related to reality.

The Direct Method   cont.

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- The "naturalistic" approaches of Gouin and a few of his contemporaries did not take hold immediately.
- A generation later, largely through the efforts of Charles Berlitz, applied linguists finally established the credibility of such approaches in what became known as the **Direct Method**.

The Direct Method   cont.

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- The basic theory of Berlitz's method was that L2 learning should be more like L1 learning.
- How?
  - lots of active oral interaction,
  - spontaneous use of the language,
  - no translation between L1 and L2,
  - and little or no analysis of grammatical rules.

The Direct Method   cont.

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Richards and Rodgers (1986) summarize the principles of the Direct Method:

1. Classroom instruction was conducted exclusively in the target language.
2. Only everyday vocabulary and sentences were taught.
3. Oral communication skills were built up in a carefully graded progression organized around question-and-answer exchanges between teachers and students in small, intensive classes.
4. Grammar was taught inductively.

The Direct Method   cont.

(124)

5. New teaching points were introduced orally.
6. Concrete vocabulary was taught through demonstration, objects, and pictures; abstract vocabulary was taught by association of ideas.
7. Both speech and listening comprehension were taught.
8. Correct pronunciation and grammar were emphasized.

The Direct Method   cont.

(125)

- The Direct Method enjoyed considerable popularity through the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th.
- It was most widely accepted in private language schools where students were highly motivated and where native-speaking teachers could be employed.

The Direct Method   cont.

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- To this day "Berlitz" is a well known word; Berlitz language schools are thriving in every country of the world. But almost any "method" can succeed when clients are willing to pay high prices for small classes, individual attention, and intensive study.
- The Direct Method did not take well in public education.
- Why??
- The constraints of budget, classroom size, time, and teacher background made such a method difficult to use.
- Moreover, the Direct Method was criticized for its weak theoretical foundations.

The Direct Method   cont.

- By the end of the first quarter of this century the use of the Direct Method had declined both in Europe and in the United States.
- Most language curricula returned to the Grammar Translation Method or to a "reading approach" that emphasized reading skills in foreign languages.
- But interestingly enough, by the middle of the 20th century the Direct Method was revived and redirected into what was probably the most visible of all language teaching in the modern era, the Audiolingual Method .

Thank You