

Study on Child Language Acquisition—Behaviorism, Nativism, and Sociolinguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

Children language acquisition has always been a study focus of linguists and language teachers. Research has found important similarities between first language acquisition and SLA. So both second language research and second language teaching have been influenced by changes in our understanding of how children acquire their first language. This paper tries to explain children language acquisition with three theoretical approaches which are behaviorism, nativism and sociolinguistic approach, hoping to offer some insight into second language teaching.

Keywords: *child language acquisition, behaviorism, nativism, sociolinguistic approach.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The wave of research in child language acquisition has lasted for more than half a century and some giant strides has been taken, including three main theoretical approaches: behavioristic, nativistic, and sociolinguistic approaches. Behavioristic and nativistic approaches hold two polarized sites in the study of FLA. They respectively stand at the two opposite points of the continuous research phases of children language acquisition studies, and there still are various possible positions existing in between. As to sociolinguistic method, it is more clearly on the cognitive side of the continuum.

Significant similarities between first and second language acquisition has been recognizes by related research. Researchers and educators put long-term endeavors, hoping for language acquisition theories which give them insight into language teaching practice.

2. THREE THEORETICAL APPROACHES IN CHILD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Researchers of each approach have raised strong evidence to argue for their positions. But can we say certain approach is more profound and advanced than others? Can any one of them solve all the problems we meet in the study of child language acquisition? In order to answer these questions, let's have a brief look on the three approaches.

2.1. Behaviorism

Behaviorism theory got into popularity during the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. It is a psychological theory of language learning [1]. Four of the important representatives in behaviorism included: Ivan Pavlov, John Watson who is sometimes called the father of behaviorism, Edward Thorndike and Burrhus Skinner. Behaviorism research found that language learning occurred, accompanied by copying, practice, response to success, and establishment of habits. Children may repeat the sounds and copy the patterns that they hear surrounding them. Children's passion in oral imitation may be aroused greatly when they receive positive feedback from environment. The positive feedback may be encouragement or praise or just successful communication, which may stimulate children to keep on repeating these sounds and patterns and continue to practice until they establish "habits" of correct language usage. To behaviorists, what is the first and foremost process in language development is imitation and practice. Lightbown and Spada record the transcripts while the child is playing with visiting adults.

Peter (24 months, Peter is playing with dump truck while two adults, Patsy and Lois, look on.)

Peter Get more.

Lois You're gonna put more wheels in the dump truck?

Peter Dump truck. Wheels. Dump truck.

Patsy What happened to it (the truck)?

Peter (looking under chair for it) Lose it. Dump

truck! Dump chuck! Fall! Fall!

Lois Yes, the dump truck fell down.

Peter Dump truck fell down. Dump truck[1].

This is an example of imitation and practice. It's easy to see that Peter imitates a great deal. It's also to note that children's imitations are not random. They are not mechanical repetitions like those of parrots who only repeat the familiar and same things unconsciously. Children select the content to imitate and their selection is conscious, which is based on something they have previously understood, not simply on what is available in the environment. The word "environment" is here being used as a wide sense term. It may be something happened right now or a situation in the bedroom, or even someone next to you (a teacher or babysitter for example). Anything or anyone may be seen as part of the environment[2]. In behaviorism, the environment is believed to play significant roles, while the role of the organism is not so essential. A vivid metaphor is that the child is born as a clean slate onto which experience writes or draws its messages.

However, in many cases, imitation and practice cannot offer sufficient evidence to account for some of the speech patterns created by the children. These forms are not sentences they heard from adults. Look at another example.

Kyo (6 years, 10 months)

Kyo I'm hungry.

Dad We'll have some poppy seed bread in a little while.

Kyo No. I want it now.

Dad We have to wait 'til it's defrosted.

Kyo But I like it frossed[1].

Kyo recognizes the prefix de- as negating the root word, so his version of the opposite of "defrosted" comes out as "frossed". This example demonstrates that the patterns of earliest utterances of a child can be explained sufficiently well by behaviorism theories, but for acquisition of the more complex grammatical structures of a language, behaviorists might feel out of their depth.

2.2. Nativism

The linguist Noam Chomsky proposed his theory in reaction to what he saw as the inadequacy of the behaviourist theory of learning based on imitation and habit formation in 1959[1]. According to Chomsky, children are born with a mechanism to program language. He claims that language develops in children in just the same way that other biological functions develop. According to Chomsky, different from what behaviorists believe, children's mind is not a piece of white paper which will be filled merely by imitating language that the environment pour on them. How on earth then do children learn? Chomsky's says that

children are born with a piece of machinery which is so powerful that they can biologically process certain patterns of language with little assistance from the environment. In another word, Children has already been equipped with some knowledge about language when they are given birth to the world. So they themselves can find out the underlying principles of a language system. This machinery is named as the language acquisition device(LAD), enabling children to do the complex task. This piece of machinery contains a kind of blueprint of how language works[2]. Chomsky's views about the LAD amount to a claim about "what does the work" in L1 acquisition. The surroundings definitely play some role in the process of children's language acquisition. After all, if there is no any language input and the children hear nothing, they will certainly not learn an L1. However, the function of input and assistance from environment should not be exaggerated, it is the children themselves who play a decisive role in language acquisition.

Chomsky revolutionized linguistics and introduced a theory known as transformational generative grammar(TG)[2]. Some researchers, however, question the rationality of the conclusion nativism. These researchers argue that too much stress have been given to the final state, which is the faculty of adult speakers in L1. The problem is that not enough emphasis has been given on the states of development, which are, in fact, especially key aspects in language acquisition.

Behaviorism and nativism has been in conflict as to the importance of the environment in first language acquisition. The behaviorism consider it all important, while for Chomsky it could not be less important[2]. Studies since 1970 have shown that Chomsky's view that the language the child receives is "degenerate" is not really true. At the beginning of the 1970s another change occurred in linguistics which was highly influential in language learning and teaching studies.

2.3. Sociolinguistic Approach

The late 1960s witnessed a shift in patterns of research. Linguists begin to realize that language is a demonstration of a person's all-round development. It mixes together cognitive and emotional capacity to cope with the world and self. They emphasize the importance of interaction. The interactionists' position is that language develops as a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristics of the child and the environment in which the child develops. Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist, introduced the sociocultural theory of human mental processing, which was considered as a forceful interactionist viewpoint in this period[3]. Vygotsky pointed that a child can acquire language in interaction with another, but not alone[1]. The importance of such interaction is justified in the case of Jim.

Jim, who was raised up by deaf parents, was a kid with normal listening competence. In his early infancy, he hardly got any contact with speaking adults until the age of three years and nine months. The only oral language he could hear was that from television. The family was unusual in that the parents did not use sign language with Jim. Thus, Jim did not begin his linguistic development in a normal development in which a parent communicated with him in either oral or sign language. Language tests administered indicated that he was very much below age level in all aspects of language. When Jim started to communicate orally with a speaking adult in strings of conversations, his oral language capacities began to elevate. By the age of 4 years and 2 months, a majority of his original unusual speech patterns had disappeared and his speech patterns demonstrated characters more typical of his age.

It's interesting to notice that Jim's younger brother Glenn did not display the same type of lag and performed normally on language tests when he was the age at which Jim was first tested. Glenn's linguistic environment was different in that he had his older brother as a conversational partner [1].

Jim showed very rapid acquisition of the structures of English once he began to interact with an adult on a one-to-one basis. The fact that he had failed to acquire language normally prior to this experience suggests that the problem lay in the environment, not the child. That is, merely getting language input or stimulation from inanimate objects, like television or radio, is inadequate for a kid to master the patterns or structure of a particular language.

Unlike Chomsky who concerns only competence but not performance in child language acquisition, sociolinguists show interest in languages performed in real world. Dell Hymes, for example, was interested in the language of disadvantaged children.

3. DOES SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES CYCLE BACK, IN PART, TO BEHAVIORISTIC APPROACHES?

According to the above description, it is easy to find out some similarities between behavioristic and sociolinguistic approaches.

3.1. Both the Two Theories Emphasize Surrounding Environment

The focus of behavioristic approach is put on the instantly noticeable aspects of linguistic behavior. Observers can easily observe the direct responses from a child in a certain environment with language input. Behaviorists also put emphasis on the relationships or links between those reactions and events in the world surrounding them. Here the surrounding environment

mainly refers to stimuli and reinforcement. Sociolinguistic approaches also claim the importance of environment. Sociolinguists, Piaget as one representatives, claim that language acquisition or learning occur only after children sufficiently interact with their surrounding environment. Children's language develops and approaches perfection gradually, meanwhile, their perceptual cognitive abilities get improvement. The cognitive capacities and linguistic competence form a complementary interaction and get mutual promotion. Children's cognitive knowledge about the world determine children's language proficiency.

3.2. Both Theories Involve the Importance of Interaction

Sociolinguistic approaches use the term "interaction" directly in their theories. Social interaction has been emphasized so much that a strong interactionist view introduces the sociocultural theory, which claims that language develops entirely from social interaction. Behavioristic approaches do not use the term "interaction" directly in their theories, but the process of stimuli-response and reinforcement is a process of interaction indeed. But we should know that imitation and practice alone cannot account for the complexity of the knowledge that all children eventually attain. Children who are exposed to language in the absence of one-to-one interaction do not develop language normally.

3.3. The two approaches all focus on the performance level of language

The responses to the environmental stimuli has once been closely observed by behaviorists and structuralists. While with the prevalence of nativism, they are hastily weeded out as "performance variables". With the advancement of linguistic research, linguists began to realize the importance of studying day-to-day performance in the field of linguistic study. They came back to those very small details of daily performance and no longer deal with abstract formal rules. The study on these real reactions have now returned to the forefront.

Though there are a few similarities between behavioristic and sociolinguistic approaches, we cannot say sociolinguistic approaches cycle back to behavioristic approaches in a simple way. In fact, compared to behavioristic approaches, sociolinguistic approaches pay more attention to underlying structures of language instead of superficial word order. In addition, functional approaches consider cognitive elements in child language acquisition while behavioristic approaches fail to do.

4. CONCLUSION

We have presented three different broad theoretical approaches to explaining first language acquisition, each of which can be corroborated by evidence. One way to reconcile the behaviorist, innatist and sociolinguistic theories is to see that each way help to explain a different aspect of children's language development. Behaviorist explanations may explain the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical morphemes. Innatist explanations seem most plausible in explaining the acquisition of complex grammar. Sociolinguistic approaches may be useful for understanding how children relate form and meaning in language, how they interact in conversations, and how they learn to use language appropriately. The past views about child language acquisition moved from extreme to extreme, from behaviorism to nativism, and then adopted some sensible middle position, sociolinguistic approach.

These theoretical approaches are milestones for language acquisition research. They offers basement and inspiration for present linguistic research and language teaching. They have had and will continue to have influence on theories on language learning and teaching.

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