

How Languages Are Learned

Language Learning in Early Childhood

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This paper will briefly discuss questions relating to some first language acquisition hypothesis from the textbook titled “How languages are learned” by Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada.

Introduction

The first chapter of “How Languages are Learned” by Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada details different theories and hypothesis about first language acquisition. The second part of the first chapter discusses two different, mostly opposing but sometimes connected, theories about first language acquisition: inner versus outer; biological versus environment; or as Anne framed it :” Nature versus Nurture”.

The first theory cited is the *Innatist perspective* :

“A central part of his thinking (Noam Chomsky) is that all human languages are fundamentally innate and that the same universal principles underlie all of them. (...) He argued that children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in just the same way that other biological functions develop. (...) The environment makes only a basic contribution – in this case, the availability of people who speak to the child. The child, or rather the child’s biological endowment, will do the rest” (p. 15, Paragraph 1, ll. 4-17).

One of the other theories put forward about first language acquisition argues the importance of the environment. It is the *connectionism hypothesis*:

“ Connectionists differ sharply from the Chomskyan innatists because they hypothesize that language acquisition does not require a separate ‘module of the mind’ but can be explained in terms of learning in general . Furthermore, connectionists argue that what children need to know is essentially available to them in the language they are exposed to. (p. 23, paragraph 2, ll 2-6).”

“Researchers such as Jeffrey Elman and his colleagues (1996) explain language acquisition in terms of how children acquire links or connections between words and phrases and the situations in which they occur (p. 23, paragraph 3, ll 1-3).”

After carefully reading this chapter with the different theories, here are some questions I felt could be raised based on the two quotes mentioned above :

Quote 1 Q 1: Is everyone successful in acquiring their first language? Are there any barriers to language acquisition in the innatist context? Will the children learn a first language no matter what the situation they are in?

Quote 2-3 Q1: Does learning the first language become a survival skill? Communication is essential to survival, and as a result, how important is feedback from the environment when acquiring the language? What are different types of feedback for children? Is it needed?

Q2 : The authors do not specify which language (social or academic) is acquired first in either context. But which one comes first? Is there a difference between social languages and academic language for young native language learners?

Before truly debating about how successful a child, or an adult, is in acquiring his first language and which hypothesis explains it better, I believe it is crucial to try to define the meaning of success in first language acquisition. Is there such a thing as a Holy Grail of first language acquisition? How many vocabulary words should a child or adult know before being regarded as having acquired his first language successfully? How much grammar? With which accent, if any? The first chapter never truly defines what perfect first language acquisition means but admits that there are different levels of acquisition depending on different factors such as socio-economic backgrounds, exposure to language, the importance of the environment or how truly innate first language acquisition is. The book also very briefly examines the issue of language disorders and delays as being factors in influencing first language acquisition. But the main focus of this chapter deals with the confrontation of opposing theories claiming to explain how first language is acquired. Each theory however is just that, a theory. No true proof is offered for either hypothesis except for a few claimed observations. No hypothesis, the connectionism or innate or critical period hypothesis, seems to fully explain how we acquire language better than the other. I believe that there are many barriers to language learning in the innatist hypothesis such as psychological (peer pressure, teacher pressure, self awareness, motivation,...), personal (disabilities, race, religion, educational background, family,...), physical (environment, location,

classroom environment,...), cultural (value and role of education, biases,...) and linguistic (accents, syntax, dialect,...). Each of those barriers could influence the innate/biological wiring of our brain by destroying it through, ironically, repetition. Repetitive peer pressure, or growing up in a bad environment, or being educated in a culturally different family, might all lead to a rewiring of the brain causing difficulties in language acquisition. But will the children learn a first language no matter what the situation they are in? Possibly. Although their level might be affected. Besides two fighting hypothesis, there also seems to be two fighting ideologies in these conflicting hypothesis. The innatist hypothesis could be viewed as human beings having been perfectly preprogrammed with a grammar digital data device, and the connectionist hypothesis as humans helping to program other younger humans with a new language of communication. The question of the how behind the what and the why remains however unsolved. If it is innatist, then how important is feedback? Is communication essential to our survival as a species? If it is, wouldn't we learn to communicate no matter which language it would be, no matter what the pattern of syntax would be? In linguistics, syntax is "the study of the rules for the formation of grammatical sentences in language". Which came first? The syntax or speech? Did we create rules of speech before speaking or was it the other way around? Those are just some of the questions I kept asking myself as I was reading the first chapter of "How Languages are Learned", but I couldn't find an answer for them. But according to the textbook, Noam Chomsky "concluded that children's minds are not blank slates to be filled by imitating language they hear in the environment. Instead, he hypothesized, children are born with a specific innate ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system on the basis of the samples of a natural language they are exposed to" (p.15, paragraph 2, ll 7-11). But if it is innate, then one other question which comes up concerns the CPH also known as the Critical Period Hypothesis.

How could we ever forget how to learn a language if it is naturally, biologically, in our brain?

The innatist theory compares first language acquisition to walking acquisition. Do we ever forget how to walk?

The need for feedback is the only point where both views seem to agree although the level and type remains a “detail” leading to differences of opinion. There are different types of feedback: positive, constructive, destructive, critical, passive, active, etc... Once again, each can be useful in its own way. The early pages of the first chapter of “How Languages are Learned” does go through a description of first language development cycle which includes different kinds of feedback through interaction with the children’s surroundings. I believe feedback is crucial to language acquisition. Without feedback, it is very difficult to determine whether or not we are speaking, writing or reading, properly. Once again, except for two cases mentioned in the textbook, there are no true test/research cases where a child was left in total isolation, without any feedback for a long period of time (or critical period of time, should I say) for anyone to determine how crucial feedback truly is to first language acquisition.

Finally, is there a type of language that is acquired first? There are two types of languages : social and academic. Which is learned first is hard to tell. Conventional wisdom would lead us to believe that social language would come first because it is the one children are generally exposed to first. But could two parents teach their child(ren) to first learn academic vocabulary? It would, once again, depend on the environment.

In conclusion, as we discuss in class, there are different SLA theories but there are no absolute. I agree that FLA (benchmark of the perfect way of learning a language) is a myth perpetuated to give a goal to attain for non native speakers. It is the chicken and the egg riddle.

