

In Theory: A Brief Overview of Language Development Theories

You're remarkable. Without prompting, you spent your first years making sense of the sounds around you. You turned gibberish into meaning. If you really stop to ponder it, it's actually quite amazing.



Think about it, how is it you're speaking the language or languages you do? It's a worthwhile question and one the linguistic and psychological communities have been exploring for decades.

A Brief Overview of Language Development Theories

The most prominent figure in language development is Noam Chomsky. There are those who have offered theories on language development, including B.F Skinner, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. There are four main theories that explain speech and language development: *nativistic*, *behavioral*, *semantic-cognitive*, and *social-pragmatic*. This article will provide you with a brief overview of their theories and perspectives.

Nativistic Theory

The nativistic theory is a biologically-based theory which states that language is innate, physiologically determined, and genetically transmitted. This means that a newborn baby is "pre-wired" for language acquisition and a linguistic mechanism is activated by exposure to language. The main theorist associated with the nativist theory is Noam Chomsky. This theory believes that language is universal and unique to only humans and that unless there are severe mental or physical limitations, or severe isolation and deprivation, humans will acquire language. The nativistic theory argues that caregivers do not teach children the understanding of language and do not usually provide feedback about the correctness of their utterances.

Chomsky developed the idea of the language acquisition device (LAD). The LAD is a language organ that is hard-wired into our brains at birth. Once a child is exposed to language, the LAD activates.

In Chomsky's book "*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*" published in 1965, he pushed forward the fundamental observation that **there are deep structures and surface structures in every sentence**, no matter what language. Essentially, deep structures are the thoughts and meanings we want to express and surface structures are the words, sounds and symbols we use to try and express

Theories of Language Acquisition

them. This is the reason why you can form sentences with similar meaning using a theoretically infinite combination of words.



Let's look at some examples. Take a look at the following sentence:

*Language development seems really complicated to me.
I think language development is really complicated.*

Both express exactly the same thing using different words and a different word order. The deep structure is the same (the notion that language development is obviously not the simplest thing in the world), though the words used (surface structure) are different.

The use of these words and their structures are refined over the course of time. It changes and evolves on the surface, but the deeper structures remain. This is a part of Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar theory.

Another important contribution Chomsky made to linguistic studies is the theory of universal grammar. He asserted that the human brain contains a mechanism for language acquisition, meaning that **our languages share the same deeper structures despite the largely superficial surface structures.**

This is why it's possible for anyone to learn a foreign language, regardless of the complexity of its grammatical structure or script.

Behavioral Theory

B.F Skinner was a behavioral psychologist. The behavioral perspective postulates that **everything we do is dictated by our environment and that our behavior is a response to external stimuli through operant conditioning**, the process through which behavior changes with positive and negative reinforcement.

Skinner theorized that language acquisition is dictated by the environment and the positive or negative reinforcement children receive from communication. Parents, for example, enforce correct usage of a word in children with positive facial or verbal reactions. They play larger roles in our “verbal behavior,” which introduces the concept of **functions to words**, as well as meanings.

For example, a child may know what to call a toilet, but they must also learn what the *use* of that word will allow them to acquire or express. They’ve heard their parents say this word, but what happens when they say it? Most likely, their parents take them to the bathroom. So in this case, the most basic function of the word is to express a need to use the bathroom.

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

Imitation and Practice

Two other concepts that are important for understanding the behaviorist ideas of speech and language development are *imitation* and *practice*. A young child will try to imitate sounds and words he hears his parents say the best he can. When a child says a word that sounds close to what the parents say, they accept and reinforce it. In other words, they begin *shaping* the word until the child can eventually say the word as well as the parents do.



An example of selective reinforcement:

A child says "mama" when his mother starts to pick him up. The mother is delighted to hear the child say this and gives the child a hug and kiss. The mother says "Mama, that's right, I'm Mama!" The

mother's affectionate response makes it more likely that the child will say "mama" again. The mother's response to the child reinforced the behavior.

Semantic-Cognitive Theory

Jean Piaget offered another perspective on language acquisition and development. The semantic-cognitive theory of language development emphasizes the interrelationship between language learning and cognition. Piaget established that **language plays a huge role in cognitive development**, chiefly in the way children use language throughout each stage of cognitive development.

Piaget's focus was on child development and the stages children go through to develop and learn. He asserted that **children would only be able to fully grasp some concepts within specific developmental stages**, due to the fact that certain sections of the brain would only further develop at certain ages.

For example, since Piaget's sensorimotor stage occurs during the first two years of a child's life, children focus on their immediate surroundings, experimenting with the things around them by playing with them, biting them or throwing them. Throughout this stage, they'll take things apart, put things back together and explore the concept of things existing in and out of sight. By the end of the sensorimotor stage, children will be able to visualize things that aren't there in front of them (object permanence), which is arguably the most crucial part of this stage when it comes to language and communication. During the sensorimotor stage, children experiment with sounds, and language is mostly about the auditory aspects. They do not care about the meaning, they just like to create sounds

Next comes Piaget's preoperational stage in which children are able to develop their imagination and think in slightly more abstract ways. They begin to toy with symbols. They'll use words in ways that aren't generally accepted or understood. For example, they may use the word "pillow" to mean "cloth" purely because of the few shared characteristics between the two objects. They also use egocentric communication. Anyone who's ever tried to communicate with a two-year-old will know that they aren't able to understand another person's perspectives. They're too busy trying to explore their own mind, to understand another person's. During the pre-operational stage, children use language to express themselves, but they can't really distinguish conversation from pure expression. They say what's on their minds – and it may not be appropriate for the time or place. This is the phase of "potty talk" for example.

During the concrete operational stage, children state facts and observations. Finally, during the formal operational stage, children are able to use language to express, discuss and debate abstract concepts.

Social-Pragmatic Theory

Vygotsky developed a theory of **social cultural development**. It's referred to as the constructivist perspective and describes the concept of development through construction of thought and meaning. Vygotsky **proposed that knowledge is a construction of meaning unique to the individual**. How a person grew up (their culture) will affect how they think and what they learn. He emphasizes the importance of others in our development (i.e., social interaction and guided learning). Vygotsky postulated that language develops similarly.

Vygotsky's social-pragmatic theory considers communication as the basic function of language. In addition, Vygotsky believed we learn language through social interactions and the words we learn is based on our culture and the people around us. Regional dialects are a perfect example. Do you call soft drinks in a can "soda", "pop" or everything is simply "Coke"? What do you call the sandwiches that you get from Subway sandwich shop? Do you call them "subs", "heros", "grinders", "wedges", "dagwoods", or a "hoagies"?

This perspective of language development is first seen in infant-caregiver interactions in which the caregiver responds to an infant's sounds and gestures. The prerequisites for the social-pragmatic theory are:

1. The infant must have a caregiver in close proximity to see, hear, or touch
2. The caregiver must meet the infant's basic physical needs such as food, warmth, and exploring the environment
3. The infant must develop an attachment to the caregiver
4. The infant and caregiver must be able to attend to the same objects or actions simultaneously
5. The infant and caregiver engage in turn-taking in both verbal and nonverbal behaviors

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



Vygotsky also focused on the development of social speech, private speech and inner speech. Social speech is the language we use with others while private speech (talking to ourselves) is not meant to communicate with others (this happens around the age of three). Inner speech only really begins to appear around the age of six or seven with private speech being internalized. Children who use inner speech stage begin to internalize language and meaning and, as Vygotsky says, begin "thinking in pure meaning." Our relationship with language becomes increasingly more sophisticated and goes beyond the meaning of the words and into the feelings or ideas the words elicit.

Adapted from:

<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/language-development-theories/#>

<https://languageacquisitionpsyc220.weebly.com/theories-of-speech--language-development.html>