



The Theory of Language Acquisition

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Abstract: In 1957, American linguist Noam Chomsky published his iconoclastic book *Syntactic Structures* where he came up with a theory that human beings are born with an innate endowment for the capacity to learn language. This theory adheres to psycholinguistic school of criticism which deems the process of learning language as an important function of the mind. Chomsky claims that human brains have an inborn Language Acquisition Device, structured to acquire any language that they are exposed to. As the child grows up, certain maturation of this nervous system happens and the child is able to engage more with language. This theory put forth by Chomsky is ground-breaking because it subverts the age old theory of Tabula Rasa given by John Locke. The mind of the human child at birth is not a blank slate, rather it is endowed with some basic knowledge about grammatical rules.

Key Words: Psycholinguistics, Children, Language Acquisition, Grammar.

Introduction:

The Theory of Universal Grammar

In 1965, Chomsky comes up with the idea of a system of Universal Grammar that helps humans to construct the internal grammar for their native languages. Universal grammar is a common system of grammatical rules for all languages. All languages across different countries have the same basic structure of grammar. All languages have certain nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. For example, a sentence in English “I want a glass of water” follows a subject+verb+object rule. The Hindi equivalent of the same sentence will go like “mujhe ek glass pani chahiye”. Here the sentence follows subject+object+verb rule. All languages have a subject, verb and an object in their sentence structure. The principles of universal grammar are common to all languages though there are variations in universal grammar across languages. Chomsky defines universal grammar as some system of principles, common to the species and available to each individual prior to experience. This means that human child is born equipped with an unconscious, internal knowledge of grammar. This is called internal grammar which is innate in all human beings. Therefore, children learn the language they are exposed to very quickly.

According to Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar, had there been no endowed internal principles for grammar, children would not have been able to acquire the grammar of a language even after experiencing the exposure to that language. However, exposure to a particular language is important because- It triggers the acquisition process through the innate capacity to learn grammar, it introduces the child with vocabulary of that language, develops the understanding of the social and cultural conventions of a language.

If the parameters of Universal grammar are what is needed, then question arises why can’t children construct the grammar of any given language? It is evident that people speak their native language

fluently and correctly. A native speaker's knowledge of language is representative of the grammar of that language. A native speaker does not judge the grammaticality of a sentence. Rather, he/she has a general mechanism for processing the acceptability of it. According to Chomsky the native speaker's internal grammar is innate.

However, a child needs to be exposed to a certain language in order to construct the internal grammar for that language. Having acquired the verbs, nouns, adjectives etc, the child is able to produce numerous new sentences in its day to day life. Therefore, children never make grammatical error in speaking a sentence though they may mispronounce some words.

But, exposure to linguistic data is not sufficient for the child to construct the grammar of his/her language. Therefore, language acquisition for second and third language is hard job. Humans usually speak one language with native competence.

Chomsky proposes a model for Language Acquisition which shows the trajectory of grammar construction in a human brain. There is a universal grammar, whose principles are common to all languages. The ability to learn the universal grammar is innate in a human mind. Experience of a language, exposure to its vocabulary triggers the acquisition process of the universal grammar. The brain processes the primary linguistic data and constructs the core grammar of the language. That's how children produce numerous new sentences every day without the help of anyone, or without any feedback from the environment. Thus in the language acquisition model UG helps in triggering the core grammar with the exposure to and experience of a language. James Higginbotham argues that "If grammar is viewed as outcome of linguistic experience, the experience serving to convert the state of the child from ignorance to knowledge of language, then there is an initial state on which this experience acts in some determinate way. The initial state Chomsky calls universal grammar. Universal grammar represents the contribution of the child to the cognitive state attained on the basis of experience; it is by definition, innate, and must include information about both what grammars are possible for human languages and how grammars from among the possible ones are to be selected." (p.151)

Chomsky's Defense of the LAD Theory

From an innate ability to construct the rules of grammar, children produce new sentences with the core grammar of that language. According to Chomsky, grammar is not a description of the performance of the speaker but rather of his linguistic competence. The Verbal output of a child may not be at par with his/her underlying competence. Thus, given a primary linguistic data to which a child is exposed to, and given the output that the child is producing in speaking out of that primary linguistic data can't determine the actual capability of the child to understand grammar of a language. Unlike linguists like B.F. Skinner who proposed behavioral theory for language learning, Chomsky's idea is quite different. Chomsky denies that much of what children learn is through imitation. Past the earliest stage, the child is exposed to numerous primary linguistic data from which it is able to produce sentences he/she may have never heard before. Children constructing new sentences without the help of anyone indicates towards an innate language acquisition device at work.

Reinforcement, casual observation, natural inquisitiveness along with a tendency to imitate etc. are important factors for language acquisition but they are not solely responsible for it. Even though a child imitates, the fact that the child is able to reproduce the phonetic structure of that language is very interesting.

A child produces telegraphic speech in their earliest stages. Gradually they learn to distinguish interrogative and negative sentences from declaratives. At the age of one or so a child mumbling “my toy” might utter it to mean that it’s his/her toy or that he/she wants to play with the toy, or that he/she loves the toy. Chomsky suggests that even in the earliest stage there exists a fuller conception of sentence structure which is not realized in his/her performance.

The underlying competence of a child can also be judged from the relation between phonemic system and the phonetic record, which is very complex in nature. For instance, a child might pronounce “school” as “cool”. Later he/she develops the ability to distinguish both the words which shows that correct phonemic representations of these words were already present in the child’s mind even when it didn’t appear in his/her performance.

Second Language Acquisition

Whether language learning capacity is innate or not is a topic of enormous debate among linguists. Chomsky tries to defend his theory of innate capability to learn language through the Universal Grammar theory. The role of UG in second language acquisition helps in understanding the process of learning a language other than the native language. There are several approaches to look at the role of UG in second language acquisition. Some proponents believe that it has no role, some believe in partial role and some in the role of UG in full capacity in the acquisition of second language. For the proponents of no role, UG stops being accessed to after a certain point and the learner has to learn the second language through some other means, like he/she acquires any other knowledge. For the proponents of full role, UG helps in constructing the grammar of the second language like it does in the case of first language. For the proponents of partial accessibility of UG, it is believed that the knowledge of grammar of the first language helps in constructing the grammar of the second language. Chomsky in his *Syntactic Structures* argues that “...It appears that the notion of “understanding a sentence” must be partially analysed in grammatical terms. To understand a sentence, it is necessary (though not, of course, sufficient) to reconstruct its representation on each level, including the transformational level, where the kernel sentences underline a given sentence can be thought of, in a sense, as the ‘elementary contents elements’ out of which each sentence is constructed. In other words, one result of the formal study of grammatical structure is that a syntactic framework is brought to light which can support semantic analysis. Description of meaning can profitably refer to this underlying syntactic framework, although systematic semantic considerations are apparently not helpful in determining it in the first place. The notion of “structural meaning” as opposed “lexical meaning”, however, appears to be quite suspect, and it is questionable that the grammatical devices available in language are used consistently enough so that meaning can be assigned to them directly.” (Chomsky, p.107-108)

In learning L2, the knowledge of L1 is already present in the child’s mind. Thus motivation for learning L2 is different from that of learning L1. A child learns the first language along with the other cognitive processes. Thus the aptitude for problem solving, communicating and thinking in the first language becomes easier. The chances of acquiring absolute competence in L2 is lesser because the learner is already able to communicate and articulate thoughts in one language, thus the parameters set for competence is low.

Language Acquisition through Social Interaction

Chomsky completely denies the argument that experience rather than an innate capacity to learn language is responsible for language acquisition. He argues that by the time the child is exposed to social interactions, the brain reaches certain maturity where given any observed input the child can produce the rules of grammar of that language.

This comes in contradiction with the idea about language acquisition from the perspective of sociolinguistics. The process of language learning is highly social than psychological according to sociolinguist William Labov. There are multiple variations of a language or even within a dialect. Speech changes within a region or even within a house. People pick up different speech style for informal setting and formal ones. Though mainstream linguists like Chomsky and Saussure recognize the presence of variations in language, they tend to often downplay it as a superficial factor underlying the more universal rule of language. For Labov, variation is intrinsic to linguistic structure. Variation exists not only within a language, but within dialects, regions, formal or informal setting in which a person talks etc. Thus variation in language is at the heart of language acquisition according to Labov. His studies reveal regular patterns of co-occurrence between language forms and socioeconomic categories. For example, pronunciation of a particular vowel varies in different social classes. Thus in sociolinguistics, social interaction is an important factor in language learning. But according to Chomsky it is only a triggering factor and not the sole reason for language acquisition.

There are several critics of Chomsky's theory of language acquisition. Pinker's theory concurred with Chomsky's in that Pinker too believed that language learning is innate in the human brain. However, Pinker argues that Chomsky is wrong about evolution. Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994) describes the role of evolution in language learning. According to him, language instinct is subject to evolution in all its complexity over hundreds of years just like any other organ in the human body evolved. Deacon in 1997, totally rejected Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar and argued that language co-evolved with the human brain. According to him, language evolved from symbolic references, from the time where humans depended on hunting in order to survive, as in they innovated language from symbols used to communicate. These theories of biogenetics reject Chomsky's idea of the innateness of language.

However, what was ground breaking in the 1900s and is still relevant today about Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar is that it nullifies the hegemonic power of politically nurtured languages and brings all languages to an equal and universal stance. The post-colonial, post war or the post-modern world with all its chaos around political power of languages needed such a theory in order to deem everybody equal. Chomsky's theory though lacks in a variationist approach which is very important for getting a realistic picture of the practice of language speaking, it gives a thorough understanding of the human mind at work for language acquisition, which is the basic component for language learning even before social interaction or coming in contact with variations in languages.

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