

Theories of Language Learning

Worldwide, people who are not yet 2 years old already speak in their native tongue. By adolescence, some teenagers compose lyrics or deliver orations that move thousands of their co-linguists. How is language learned so easily and so well? Answers come from three schools of thought, each connected to a theory (behaviorism, sociocultural theory, and universalism). The first says that infants are directly taught, the second that social impulses propel infants to communicate, and the third that infants naturally understand language because of a brain advance thousands of years ago that allowed survival of our species.

Theory One: Infants Need to Be Taught

The seeds of the first perspective were planted more than 50 years ago, when the dominant theory in North American psychology was behaviorism, or learning theory. The essential idea was that all learning is acquired, step by step, through association and reinforcement. Just as Pavlov's dogs learned to associate the sound of a tone with the presentation of food (see Chapter 2), behaviorists believe that infants associate objects with words they have heard often, especially if reinforcement occurs.

B. F. Skinner (1957) noticed that spontaneous babbling is usually reinforced. Typically, every time the baby says "ma-ma-ma," a grinning mother appears, repeating the sound as well as showering the baby with attention, praise, and perhaps food. These affordances of mothers are exactly what infants want, so babies repeat those sounds, and, via operant conditioning, talking begins.

Most parents worldwide are excellent instructors, responding to their infants' gestures and sounds (Cros-Louis et al., 2006). Even in preliterate societies, parents use child-directed speech, responding quickly with high pitch, short sentences, stressed nouns, and simple grammar—exactly the techniques that behaviorists would recommend.

The core ideas of this theory are the following:

- Parents are expert teachers, although other caregivers help.
- Frequent repetition is instructive, especially when linked to daily life.
- Well-taught infants become well-spoken children.

Behaviorists note that some 3-year-olds converse in elaborate sentences; others just barely put one simple word with another. Such variations correlate with the amount of language that child has heard. Parents of the most verbal children teach language throughout infancy—singing, explaining, listening, responding, and reading to them every day, even before age 1 (Forget-Dubois et al., 2009). In a detailed U.S. study, researchers analyzed the language that mothers used with their 9-month-old infants (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001). Although all the mothers in that study were from the same nation and all were middle-class, in 10 minutes one mother never imitated her infant's babbling; another mother imitated 21 times, babbling back in conversation. Mothers often described things or actions (e.g., "That is a spoon you are holding—spoon"), but one mother provided only 4 descriptions while another provided 33.

The frequency of maternal responsiveness at 9 months predicted language acquisition at 17 months (see Figure 6.1). It was not that noisy infants, whose genes would soon make them start talking, elicited more talk. Some quiet infants had mothers who frequently suggested play activities, described things, and asked questions. Quiet infants with talkative mothers usually became talkative later on. Those results are confirmed by research from many nations. For example, in one

Especially for Nurses and Pediatricians
Babies and young children have been reading about language development in children. They are convinced that because language is "taught," they need not talk to their youngest son. How do you respond? (see response, page 174)

30 Answer to Observation Quiz (from page 173) The one on the left, which allows the baby to listen, watch, and talk to the other. One-on-one interaction is pivotal for learning language no matter which theory is right—environment, brain stimulation, or