

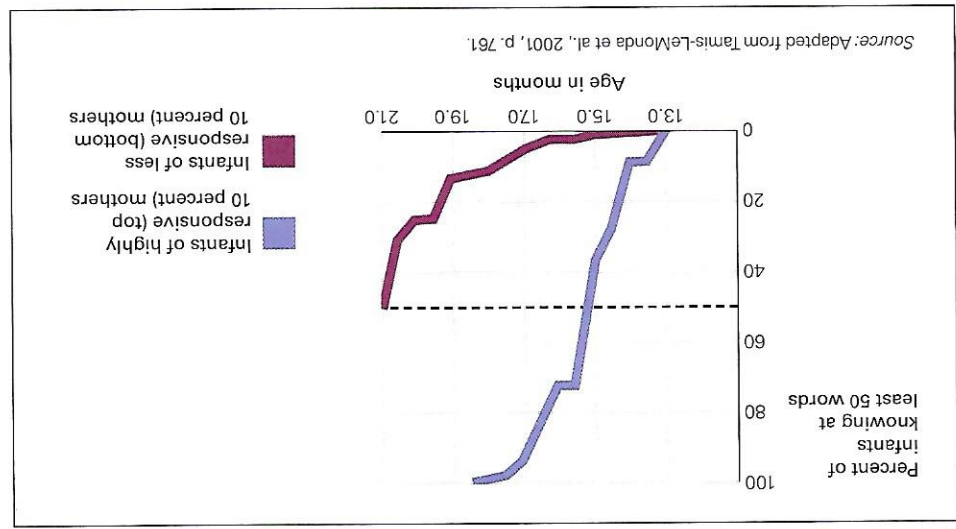


FIGURE 6.1

Maternal Responsiveness and Infants' Language Acquisition Learning the first 50 words is a milestone in early language acquisition, as it predicts the arrival of the naming explosion and the multiword sentence a few weeks later. Researchers found that the 9-month-old infants of highly responsive mothers (top 10 percent) reached this milestone as early as 15 months. The infants of nonresponsive mothers (bottom 10 percent) lagged significantly behind.

large study in Australia, parents who provided extensive language to their preverbal infants had children who spoke early and well (Reilly et al., 2006). Thus, many studies confirm the behaviorist theory that adults teach language and infants learn it. According to this perspective, if adults want children who speak, understand, and (later) read well, they must talk to their babies.

Theory Two: Social Impulses Foster Infant Language

The second theory is called *social-pragmatic*. It arises from the sociocultural reason for language: communication. According to this perspective, infants communicate because humans are social beings, dependent on one another for survival and joy. Each culture has practices that further social interaction; talking is one of those practices.

It is the emotional messages of speech, not the words, that are the focus of early communication, according to this perspective. In one study, people who had never heard English (Shuar hunter-gatherers living isolated near the Andes mountains) listened to tapes of North American mothers talking to their babies. The Shuar successfully distinguished speech conveying comfort, approval, attention, and prohibition, without knowing any of the words (Bryant & Barrett, 2007). Thus, the social content of speech is universal, which is why babies learn whatever specifics their culture provides.

Suppose an 18-month-old is playing with an unnamed toy and an adult utters a word. Does the child connect that word to the toy? A behaviorist, learning-by-association prediction would be yes, but the answer is no. In an experiment, when toddlers played with a fascinating toy and adults said a word, the toddlers looked up, figured out what the adult was looking at, and assigned the new word to that, not to the fascinating toy (Baldwin, 1993). This supports theory two: The toddlers wanted to know what the adults intended.

Another study also suggests social learning. Many 1-year-olds enjoy watching television (e.g., *Teletubbies*), but they probably do not learn much from it. In a controlled experiment, 1-year-olds learned vocabulary much better when someone directly taught them than when the same person taught the same lesson in the same way on a video (Roseberry et al., 2009). This suggests personal, social language acquisition, not impersonal learning.



College Grad, Class of '33? Reading to an infant correlates with talking at age 1, reading to an at age 5, and college graduation at age 21. Of course, correlation is not causation, but in any case, this shared joy bodes well for the future.

Especially for Educators An infant day-care center has a new child whose parents speak a language other than the one the teachers speak. Should the teachers learn basic words in the new language, or should they expect the baby to learn the majority language? (see response, page 175)