

How do you evaluate one or more of the approaches to language development: Associationist, Cognitive

Language development is a very important part of the overall development of the child, and has been a focus of attention for many years. Within the last forty years, there has been a progression of theories which attempt to account for the speed and success of the young child's acquisition of language - the most recent of which is the functionalist (social interactionist) theory. This theory takes some of what is good from associationist (behaviourist), Chomskian (linguistic) and cognitive theories, and combines this with aspects which they tend to neglect, to make what is presently the most convincing theory of language acquisition.

A brief resume of its forerunners is necessary in order to view functionalism in the correct way. In 'Verbal Behaviour' (1957), Skinner proposed a theory which accounted for language acquisition in purely behavioural terms: the child as a passive recipient learns language through extended classical and operant conditioning. Although such a theory has obvious shortcomings, it still attracts some followers. Chomsky responded to the behaviourist theory in 1959, when he stated his own theory based on linguistics: language is an innate ability for which there is a language acquisition device (LAD) in the brain, and every child is equipped with inborn knowledge about syntax and semantics (structured knowledge)- for example that actors perform actions on objects. "Learning is primarily a matter of filling in detail within a structure that is innate," (Chomsky, 1976). The linguistic theory provided much of the impetus for subsequent research into language. The third theory on which functionalism draws is cognitive, based on the work of Piaget. Here, the child must be in possession of the semiotic function in order for language development to occur. These theories have provided much data which functionalists have used, as well as a starting point for a new theory.

In functionalist theory, the child is seen as having an innate pre-disposition to learn language (as opposed to the cognitivist's innate grammar), but he/she needs the environment to stimulate development. This is in contrast to the behaviourist notion that the environment is the sole source of language. Functionalism takes as its data the precursors and prerequisites to language. The fundamental belief is that language's purpose is communication, whatever its syntax or semantics, and the child shows his/her intention to communicate even before language itself appears. The child demonstrates this by behaviours such as gazing at objects in which he/she is interested, in order to direct the mother's attention: the mother is less likely to look away when the infant is gazing than when the infant is not gazing (Stern, 1974). The mother, or primary caretaker, helps to mould these communicative intentions, as she treats the child from the start as a conversational partner; any noise that the infant makes is regarded as her turn in the conversation, for example when she burps, the mother may respond with "Yes, that's right!" (Snow, 1977). By seven months, the mother only responds to high quality

vocalisations, and in this way, 'shapes' the child's behaviour. Despite the evident necessity of there being an intention to communicate for language to occur, this has been neglected in earlier theories. Behaviourists see the child as a passive recipient, who merely imitates what she hears, not as someone with active intentions. Linguistic theory ignores the precursors to language altogether - if language is innate, then there is little point in studying it precursor, and intent is taken for granted. Finally, cognitivists view the child very much as a separate entity, that is, they concentrate on what is going on in her head, not her social intentions. It seems that functionalism takes up an important aspect of language development that has hitherto received little attention.

Similarly, functionalism emphasises the role of the infant-caretaker dyad: the unique relationship between mother and child provides a social and conceptual framework in which the infant learns what to say, and how and when to say it. Play is an important part of this, particularly games in which there are prescribed roles, and which follow the same pattern every time, such as 'peekaboo' teaching the child about turntaking: she learns that when the other person pauses, you perform a behaviour, and vice versa (Bruner, 1975). The mother's language (known as 'motherese') which she uses with the child is also tailored to maximise development: it is repetitive, context-bound and ritualistic (Ferrier, 1978), which enables the child to come to expect a certain language in a certain situation, and its speech register is adapted to best suit the child's hearing (Snow, 1978). Previous theories have tended to neglect the importance of this active partnership between mother and child; behaviourism recognises that the caretaker is important, as someone who provides the input on which the child bases her language, but it does not consider this as a relationship in which both partners have an active, interactive role, and develop to meet the changing demands of the other. Linguists, on the other hand, see a language almost as something that comes from within; the LAD simply has to 'find out' which language the child is learning and the child will assimilate her innate knowledge with what she hears. No real mention is made of input, or of the role of the mother. Similarly, cognitivists see language as dependent on something within the child (her concepts and abilities), not as something which is part of an interactive environment.

Of course, not everything which has been put forward by the three older theories has been found to be incorrect; indeed, much of their data is used to support functionalist claims, and some aspects of each may also be viewed as evidence in favour of functionalism. This is inevitable as one may view functionalism as merely a logical progression from its predecessors. The basic claim of behaviourism, i.e. that language is acquired by the child hearing words and repeating them, is to a certain extent quite correct - input is essential to the development of any recognisable language (although it has been known for children with no input to create a very simple, symbolic language of their own). A phenomenon often cited in support of linguistic theories may be seen as evidence of the child's creativity in language, i.e. her active role; all English speaking children go through a stage of overgeneralisation of rules, such as when they discover the rule that past tenses are formed by adding '-ed' to the verb stem, they stop using the correct form of strong verbs and begin to say 'goed' 'doed', etc. Here they are actively creating their own small grammar based on rules. Many of the cognitivist's assertions may be seen in this functionalist light, for example, that naming only begins to develop once the object

concept has been grasped. Note, however, that Gopnik and Choi (1987) studies Korean, French and English children, finding that in Korean, language appears to affect cognition: verbs are more salient than nouns and children tend to perceive the world in terms of actions rather than objects. There is certainly a link between cognition, language and the environment, an important basis of functionalism.

However, functionalism is a relatively new theory and in many respects has not been adequately assessed. For example, its proponents fail to state precisely how motherese help the child to learn language or if it is really causal at all. In fact, Shatz (1982) states explicitly that the gestural features of maternal speech do not help language acquisition. As to the interpretation of pre-linguistic communicative acts by the caretaker, it is very difficult to say whether the intention is conscious on the part of the child, or whether it is provided by highly motivated mothers - as much of what the child utters in the early stages is impossible to understand (Ryan, 1974). In addition, there are variations in the attitudes of mothers to the child's communicative intent: middle class mothers are more anxious to 'find' this intent, whereas working class mothers are more laissez-faire (Howe, 1975). Speech data reported by Bowerman (1978) provides evidence that, concerning the extension of words to novel referents, function is not as relevant as perception, suggesting that it is perhaps not as salient to some aspects of language development as its supporters would believe. Although this may seem a reasonable amount of evidence to refute functionalism, we must remember that functionalism has yet to be fully developed and investigated, and that so far functionalism has tended to draw on data used by other theories.

It seems clear from the evidence presented above that the field of language acquisition has always been a controversial one, probably due to its great importance in development. Several theories have been put forward which attempt to account for the data; however, these theories have tended to be succeeded usually because they have not considered all of the data, but have concentrated on a small area which seems to support their assertions. The most recent theory, functionalism or social interactionism, appears to be the most reliable in explaining the available data. Although it has yet to completely account for language acquisition, it certainly provides a sound basis on which future research may be carried out.

Approx 1,500 words.

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