BEHAVIORIST THEORY. You are probably familiar with behaviorism as a major

learning theory emphasizing stimulus, response, and reinforcement as the basic

elements of learning. For language acquisition, behaviorists hypothesized that children

learned their first language through stimulus, response, and reinforcement as

well, postulating imitation and association as essential processes. For example, to

learn the word ball, the child would first associate the word ball with the familiar

spherical object, the stimulus. Next the child would produce the word by imitation,

at which time an adult would praise the child for saying ball, thereby reinforcing

the child’s correct verbal response. Behaviorists assumed that the child’s mind was a

tabula rasa, a blank mental slate awaiting the scripture of experience.

Behaviorist concepts of imitation and reinforcement could not account for

typical child utterances like “Him don’t say it right,” which were clearly not

imitations of adult speech. Moreover, behaviorists could not explain how any novel utterance was produced, even those that were grammatically correct. Yet

most utterances we produce in conversation or writing are in fact original. That

is, they are not pat phrases we have learned by hearing and repeating. In addition,

child language researchers noticed that parents typically reinforce their

children for the meaning of their utterances, not for grammatical correctness.

These and other concerns were boldly pointed out as Noam Chomsky (1957)

engaged in a heated debate with behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1957), attacking

behaviorist theory as inadequate to explain observations of child language

development.

**INNATIST THEORY.** Chomsky was able to garner some strong arguments

against the behaviorist explanation of language acquisition, using examples

from children’s developing grammars, such as our example from Hope.

Skinner and his behaviorist colleagues were experts in psychology, applying

their theories to verbal behavior. Chomsky, on the other hand, was a linguist

with a genius for analyzing syntax. In fact, his early work on syntax and transformational

grammar revolutionized the field of linguistics (Chomsky, 1957,

1959). Chomsky’s explanations of grammatical rules and transformations

became the subject of psychological research on language use in the interdisciplinary

field of psycholinguistics.

As Chomsky pondered the complex intricacies of children’s development of

grammar, he concluded that language acquisition could only be accounted for by

an innate, biological language acquisition device (LAD) or system. Infants must

come into the world “prewired for linguistic analysis.” Specifically, Chomsky

claims that infants universally possess an innate “grammar template,” or universal

grammar, which will allow them to select out the many grammatical rules of

the language they hear spoken around them, as they gradually construct the

grammar of their mother tongue.

From the innatist perspective, children construct grammar through a

process of hypothesis testing. For example, a child may hypothesize the rule that

*all* plural nouns end with an -*s*. Thus when they come to a word such as *child*,

they form the plural as *childs*, or when they come to the word *man*, they say

*mans* for the plural. Gradually, they will revise their hypothesis to accommodate

exceptions to the plural rule. Thus children create sentences by using rules rather

than by merely repeating messages they have heard, as assumed by behaviorists.

This application of rules accounts for the generative nature of language. With a

finite set of rules, people can generate an infinite number of novel utterances.

Children acquire the rules, according to Chomsky, with little help from their

parents or caregivers. But as Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner stated

(Gardner, 1995, p. 27), the Chomskyan view is “too dismissive of the ways that

mothers and others who bring up children help infants to acquire language.”

Gardner argues that, “while the principles of grammar may indeed be acquired

with little help from parents or other caretakers, adults are needed to help

children build a rich vocabulary, master the rules of discourse, and distinguish

between culturally acceptable and unacceptable forms of expression.” This

interest in the role of people in the social environment provides the focus of

the next theoretical perspective on language acquisition that we discuss, the

interactionist perspective. In response to Chomsky’s emphasis on innate grammar

mechanisms centered in the infant, interactionists have brought back an

interest in the role of the social environment and the influence of parents and

caregivers on children’s language acquisition.

INTERACTIONIST THEORY. According to the interactionist position, caregivers

play a critical role in adjusting language to facilitate the use of innate capacities

for language acquisition. This is in sharp contrast to the innatist view that adapting

language has little effect on a child’s acquisition process. The interactionist

view thus takes into consideration the importance of both nature and nurture in

the language acquisition process.

Interactionists study the language mothers and other caregivers use when

caring for infants and young children, with special attention to modifications

they make during these social interactions to assist children in communication.

One strategy often observed between English-speaking, middle-class mothers and

their toddlers is conversational scaffolding (Ninio & Bruner, 1978), as illustrated

in the following conversation:

CHILD: Birthday cake Megan house.

MOTHER: We had birthday cake at Megan’s house. What else did we do

at Megan’s house?

CHILD: Megan dolly.

MOTHER: Megan got a doll for her birthday, didn’t she?

In this conversation, the mother repeats the child’s meaning using an

expanded form, thereby verifying her understanding of the child’s words while

modeling adult usage. In addition, the mother assists or scaffolds the toddler’s

participation in the conversation through prompting questions at the end of each

of her turns. In this way, scaffolding provides conversational assistance and

focused linguistic input tuned to the child’s own interests and language use at that

moment. By preschool age, this kind of scaffolded conversation is no longer necessary.

Whether scaffolding is actually necessary for language acquisition has not

been verified. In fact, ways in which infants and young children are spoken to

varies across cultures (Ochs & Schieffelen, 1984; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984).

Nonetheless, caregivers generally facilitate children’s vocabulary development,

their ability to use language appropriately in social situations, and their ability to

get things done through language.

Children’s language develops over time, not within a single interaction.