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### محتوى المحاضرة

## Language Acquisition

**Acquisition**, in the context of language, refers to the natural, subconscious process by which individuals, especially children, learn a language. Unlike learning a language through formal instruction (which is more deliberate and conscious), **acquisition** occurs through **exposure** and **interaction** with the language in a social context, for example, in **first language acquisition**, a child absorbs the language they are surrounded by, gradually understanding and producing sounds, words, and sentences without explicit teaching. This process typically takes place in early childhood and is seen as instinctive or innate, guided by the child's **cognitive** and **social** development.

Key characteristics of language acquisition include:

- ✦ **Subconscious:** The individual is not actively aware of learning or applying grammatical rules.
- ✦ **Natural:** It happens in a natural environment through exposure to language in everyday situations.
- ✦ **Contextual:** Language is acquired through meaningful communication with others, usually within a cultural and social context.

In contrast to learning a language (which may involve studying rules and structures in a classroom), **acquisition** is the effortless, organic process that leads to proficiency in a language.

## Introduction to First Language Acquisition

First language acquisition refers to the process by which children learn to understand and produce language. According to John Lyons, a leading figure in linguistics, this process is both complex and fascinating. Children acquire their first language naturally and without formal instruction, demonstrating an innate ability to learn language.

Lyons, in *The Study of Language*, emphasizes that language acquisition involves both universal principles—shared across all human languages—and specific cultural and environmental factors. His work ties together theories from different areas of linguistics, including syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

## Stages in Language Acquisition

Lyons identifies several stages in the first language acquisition process. These stages are important for understanding how a child transitions from non-linguistic sounds to complex syntactical structures:

### 1. Pre-linguistic Stage (0-6 months):

- ✦ In this stage, infants start producing sounds like cooing, babbling, and crying. This is the foundation for later speech and is not yet real language. These sounds are mostly involuntary but lay the groundwork for the development of phonological awareness.

Cooing and babbling are both early stages of vocalization in infants, and while they might seem similar, they represent different developmental milestones in language acquisition. Here's a breakdown of the key differences between **cooing** and **babbling**:

### 1. Age of Occurrence

- **Cooing** typically begins around **6 to 8 weeks** of age. It is the first vocalization that infants make that sounds more like speech, but it is still very simple.
- **Babbling** usually starts between **4 to 6 months** and continues through the first year. Babbling represents a more advanced stage of vocalization where infants begin experimenting with the sounds that will form the basis of speech.

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## 2. Type of Sounds Produced

- ✚ **Cooing:** This stage involves mostly **vowel-like sounds**. Infants produce soft, continuous sounds such as "oo," "ah," and "ee." These sounds tend to be produced in a relaxed manner and are often accompanied by smiling or other facial expressions.
  - Example sounds: "oo," "ah," "eee," "uh."
- ✚ **Babbling:** In this stage, infants begin to combine **consonants** and **vowels** together, forming repetitive consonant-vowel combinations, often referred to as **CV syllables**. The babbling sounds can include more varied consonants, such as "b," "d," "m," and "p," and the vocalization becomes more rhythmic and complex.
  - Example sounds: "ba-ba," "da-da," "ma-ma," "ga-ga," "pa-pa."

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## 3. Purpose and Function

- ✚ **Cooing** is typically a **social, emotional** expression. It is a way for infants to engage with their caregivers and may be used to express pleasure or contentment. Cooing does not involve much purposeful imitation of the speech sounds adults make, but rather is a spontaneous, exploratory vocalization.
- ✚ **Babbling** shows more **linguistic exploration**. While still not true speech, babbling marks an important step toward language acquisition because it involves the infant starting to experiment with the building blocks of speech (e.g., consonants and vowels). Babbling is seen as a precursor to later language development and is often a way for infants to practice the motor skills needed for speaking.

## 4. Interaction with Environment

- ✚ **Cooing:** At this stage, infants typically make cooing sounds when they are content or during positive interactions with caregivers. It's often a **self-stimulatory** activity, and infants may coo in response to their caregivers' voices, but it is less likely to be a direct imitation of adult speech.
- ✚ **Babbling:** At this point, infants are often starting to **imitate** the speech sounds they hear in their environment. Babbling is more **interactive**—caregivers might respond to it by making sounds back, and infants may even try to "converse" with adults in a nonverbal way. As babies become more advanced in babbling, they may attempt to repeat or mimic the intonations and rhythms of the speech they hear around them.

## 5. Linguistic Relevance

- ✚ **Cooing** is not directly related to the structure of the language the infant is hearing. It's more of a universal stage across cultures, as infants produce similar vowel sounds regardless of the language they are exposed to.
- ✚ **Babbling**, on the other hand, begins to show more **language-specific characteristics**. The sounds that babies produce in their babbling become increasingly influenced by the language(s) they hear around them. For example, infants raised in English-speaking environments might babble with a greater frequency of sounds like “b,” “d,” and “t,” while infants raised in different language environments may babble with different phonetic patterns that are more common in those languages.

### Linguistic Development

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In essence, **cooing** is an early, simple vocalization stage where infants experiment with producing sounds, often to express emotions or engage with caregivers. **Babbling**, on the other hand, is a more complex stage where infants begin to experiment with consonant and vowel combinations, laying the groundwork for the eventual production of words and speech. Both stages are essential in the process of language development, marking the gradual transition from pre-verbal sounds to more speech-like patterns.

#### 2. **One-word Stage (12-18 months):**

- ✚ At this stage, children begin to produce their first recognizable words, often referred to as "holophrases." These single words convey more than one meaning, e.g., “milk” could mean "I want milk" or "Here is the milk." ✚ Lyons points out that this is the beginning of the child’s understanding of symbols: words as representations of objects or concepts.

#### 3. **Two-word Stage (18-24 months):**

- ✚ Children begin combining two words, often using simple syntax, e.g., "want cookie," or "big dog." The syntax is rudimentary but serves to indicate a developing understanding of sentence structure.
- ✚ Lyons notes that this stage demonstrates that children have started to grasp word order and the relationships between subjects, verbs, and objects.

#### 4. **Early Multi-word Stage (24-36 months):**

- ✚ Children now begin constructing sentences with three or more words. At this point, they start forming more complex syntactical structures, such as questions ("Where go?") and negations ("No want").
- ✚ Lyons highlights that children at this stage begin to use grammatical morphemes (e.g., plurals, verb tenses) though they may not always be used correctly.

#### 5. **Later Multi-word Stage (36+ months):**

- ✚ As children approach the age of four, they begin to speak in full sentences and use more advanced grammar. They begin to form compound and complex sentences, use subordinate clauses, and demonstrate more sophisticated verb forms.

- ✦ Lyons emphasizes that by this stage, children have mastered the basic grammatical structures of their native language.

## The Role of Innateness in Language Acquisition

John Lyons is a proponent of the **innateness hypothesis** of language acquisition, which suggests that children are born with an inherent ability to acquire language. This ability is activated by exposure to linguistic input from their environment. This view contrasts with more behaviorist theories, which argue that language learning is a process of imitation and reinforcement.

Lyons argues that all human beings are equipped with a *universal grammar*, a set of principles common to all languages. He draws on the work of Noam Chomsky, who proposed that children possess an inborn linguistic ability (the *language faculty*) that allows them to acquire language in a natural and systematic way. According to this view, when children hear language in their environment, they subconsciously "tap into" these universal structures.

## The Importance of Input in Language Acquisition

While Lyons recognizes the role of innate structures, he also underscores the importance of input in the language acquisition process. Children learn language primarily through exposure to the speech around them. However, the input alone is not sufficient. It must be rich enough to allow children to discern patterns, phonemes, words, and syntax. This is known as the **"poverty of the stimulus" problem**—the idea that children are not provided with all the data necessary to fully learn a language, yet they do so with impressive speed and accuracy.

Lyons notes that the environment provides not only linguistic input but also social cues, such as gestures, expressions, and context, that help children infer meaning. This social interaction is essential for language development. He highlights the interplay between cognitive development and linguistic exposure, emphasizing that the child's active engagement with the world is key.

## Theoretical Implications of Lyons' Work

John Lyons' treatment of first language acquisition is notable for its integration of various linguistic theories:

- ✦ **Generative Grammar:** Lyons supports Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, noting that children's ability to learn complex syntactical structures points to an innate linguistic capacity.
- ✦ **Cognitive Development:** He acknowledges the role of cognitive development in language acquisition. The child's cognitive growth enables them to understand abstract concepts like time and negation, which are crucial for language.

- ✦ **Sociocultural Context:** Lyons also emphasizes the importance of social context. Language is not learned in a vacuum, and interactions with caregivers and peers play a critical role in shaping the way children acquire language.

Lyons' work provides valuable insight into the complexity of first language acquisition. It underscores the balance between innate biological structures and the crucial role of environmental input. Understanding how children acquire language informs not only linguistic theory but also education, particularly in the fields of language teaching and cognitive development.

Through Lyons' framework, we recognize that language acquisition is not a mechanical process but a dynamic, interactive one that involves the child's developing mind, social environment, and the richness of linguistic input. For linguists and educators, this highlights the need to support language development with varied and meaningful interactions, both inside and outside the classroom. According to John Lyons and many other linguists, **imitation** and **correction** are important aspects of language acquisition, but they do not play the main role in the process. Instead, **innate mechanisms**, **cognitive processes**, and **interactional factors** are considered the key drivers in how children acquire their first language.

## Imitation

In the early stages of language acquisition, it is true that children often imitate the language they hear around them. They mimic sounds, words, and sentence structures, which is a natural and necessary part of learning to speak.

However, **imitation alone** does not account for the richness and complexity of language acquisition. John Lyons, following the ideas of Noam Chomsky, argues that children do not simply replicate what they hear. Instead, they use an inherent, **mental language framework** to generate novel sentences that they've never heard before. For example, a child might produce a sentence like "I goed to the park"—a structure they've never heard but is based on their understanding of regular past-tense formation.

This ability to generate novel language shows that children are not merely imitating. Rather, they are actively constructing language using an **innate grammar**—which Lyons describes as part of the universal grammar theory. Therefore, imitation serves as one aspect of language learning, but not the central one.

## Correction

Correction, in terms of explicit adult feedback or grammatical correction, seems to have less impact on children's ability to acquire language than is often assumed. Lyons discusses the **poverty of the stimulus**, which refers to the fact that the linguistic input available to children is often incomplete or ambiguous, yet children still manage to master complex grammatical structures.

Research has shown that adults rarely correct children's grammar directly. Instead, they tend to offer **recasts**—repeating the child's statement with the correct form. For instance, if a child says, "I can't find my shoes," an adult might say, "Oh, you can't find your shoes?" This type of indirect feedback helps children hear the correct forms, but it's not a significant factor in *learning* those forms.

What is crucial, according to Lyons and other cognitive linguists, is the **social interaction** and **cognitive engagement** in the environment. The context in which language is used (e.g., pointing to objects, responding to questions) helps children infer rules and meanings. Therefore, even without explicit correction, children are often able to make sense of language patterns through exposure and interaction.

## **The Main Factors in Language Acquisition**

1. **Innate Cognitive Structures:** Children are born with an innate capacity for language—what Chomsky calls the "language faculty." This mental framework helps children rapidly and naturally learn the structures of any language to which they are exposed.
2. **Social Interaction:** The environment is crucial for language acquisition, but not simply for imitation and correction. Interaction with caregivers and peers helps children understand how language works in context. It's through meaningful, communicative exchanges that children learn not just the rules of grammar, but also how to use language for different social purposes.
3. **Cognitive Development:** Children's cognitive development—such as their ability to understand abstract concepts like time, negation, and causality—also plays a key role in acquiring language. For example, as children develop the cognitive ability to understand past and future events, they begin to use verb tenses appropriately.

While imitation and correction can certainly aid in language acquisition, they are not the central or driving forces. The main role in first language production comes from the interaction between **innate cognitive structures** and **social interaction** with the environment. Children actively construct language through exposure and use, guided by their inborn capacity to learn and process linguistic input. In sum, imitation and correction may play a supporting role, but they do not define the process of first language acquisition.