Second language acquisition

Linguistic schools of thought

1.1 Structuralism

Linguistics started to be studied as a science by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. Among his numerous contributions we can mention the following:

• Language is a system that functions according to rules established conventionally by speakers.

• The linguistic sign is the most elemental unit of language, and it is composed by an acoustic aspect (signified) and a semantic component (signifier).

• There is a distinction between ‘parole’ (the use of language) and ‘langue’ (the theoretical system).

This approach implied that language teaching was centered on grammatical aspects, and in learning formal linguistic elements and rules. Only by means of this knowledge, are speakers able to use language correctly. Along with these studies, there was research in psychology, especially within the behaviorist approach.

1.2 Functionalism

In the early decades, linguists studied and compared different languages to analyze the relation between the linguistic form and meaning. Emphasis was given to the actual use of language to communicate, and to organize our thought. The research studies in this approach are heterogeneous; however, we can mention the following contributions:

• Description of the elements of communication.

• Language Functions (Referential, Emotive, Connative, Phatic, Metalinguistic, Poetic).

• Establishment of phonology as a linguistic area.

• Speakers’ culture is reflected in linguistic forms and uses.

1.3 Transformational-Generative Grammar

This is considered the most influential linguistic theory, and it was developed by the North American researcher Noam Chomsky. He proposed that language could not be explained only by observable facts. This evidence was incomplete for analysis, and he emphasized a mentalist (cognitive) approach. Although it has been modified through different stages, the following are considered the most significant contributions made by Chomsky:

• Language cannot be learned only by habit formation.
• Language is an innate faculty for all human beings (Language Acquisition Device), which contains a common underlying grammar of all languages (Universal Grammar).

• Development of a theory with emphasis on semantics and syntax that can be analyzed scientifically (Deep and Superficial Structure).

• Outline of Principles (linguistic rules) common to all languages, and Parameters (exceptions) proper to some languages.

• Speakers have a linguistic competence (knowledge of the language) that is used in their linguistic performance (use of the language in specific situations).

Cognitive view of language learning

The cognitivists were thoroughly dissatisfied with many of the ideas propagated by the Behaviorists. They maintain that learning cannot be equated with behavior because observed behavior is only the outward manifestation of internal changes, which the organism may have undergone as a result of learning. Yet, these internal changes are not in themselves observable. In fact, the discipline behavior may be only for what is called “tip of the iceberg”; the changes of internal state may be far more significant. For example, a parrot being trained to talk may not begin to talk for a long time leading the learner to believe that is was learning nothing. Yet learning could be talent form. When certain critical stage is reached the parrot might suddenly begin talking. Cognitive view: language is not behavior but a mental process, one might speak a language on a stage he reached.

Secondly, the cognitivists believe the view that language is behavior is one sided and superficial. Language seems to have a double nature. On the one hand, it is a form of codified, patterned social behavior, but on the other hand, it is an abstract logical system comparable to mathematics. The difference lies in the fact that while mathematics is derived from some kind of universal logic, language system us largely arbitrary and conventional. However, it cannot be denied that language learning means being able to do the right things at the right time of producing the appropriate behavior.

The main reason why the cognitivists were thoroughly dissatisfied with behaviorism was that it does not distinguish between human and animals and between the higher and lower forms of learning. That is Behaviorism sounds repugnant to those who believe in the uniqueness of human species.

2.1 Terminology

It has been stated that languages can be acquired or learned, according to the context in which these processes occur.

Language acquisition: It is an unconscious process that takes place through natural exposure and meaningful interaction in the target language.
**Language learning:** It is a conscious process that takes place through formal instruction of the target language.

There are several terms used to refer to additional languages to the L1:

- **Second Language.** It is the official language of a speech community, used mainly in education, work and media. It is the language that other minority groups of speakers must learn in order to communicate.

- **Foreign Language.** It is the language that is not part of the immediate social and communicative context, but that is studied or learned because of educational, cultural or working purposes.

- **Target Language.** It is the language that a non-native speaker is in the process of learning.

### 2.2 Theories of language acquisition

The first language, mother tongue or native language (L1) is the one that is acquired in early childhood within a speaking community. Different theories have been proposed to explain essential factors and processes in first language acquisition.

A. **Innatism.** According to this approach, all children acquire their L1 automatically, even if they do not have access to enough stimuli. In addition, children are not required to be explained formal aspects of the language in order to acquire and use it.

B. **Behaviorism.** According to this approach, language is acquired due to the stimuli present in the environment, and to which children respond. For example, an adult uses a word that refers to an object. This action provokes a particular response. Through the repetition of this process, children get to know the meaning of a word, and to use a linguistic stimulus to obtain a response. Although this approach has been considered controversial, it emphasizes important imitative components of the learning process.

C. **Cognitive Theory.** Language is seen as another component of cognitive development, since children acquire it along with notions of abstract thinking, categorization and concepts.

D. **Theory of Social Interaction.** According to this approach, children acquire language by means of others’ mediation, and not only through mental processing of adults’ language. In addition, language acquisition develops from children’s communicative needs according to their context.