

Reading Passage (206 words): Theories of Child Language Acquisition

There are more than 5,500 languages in the world, and, no matter where they are born, children are equally capable of learning their native tongue. How is it then that children learn a language?

According to the Imitation Theory, children learn grammar by memorizing the words and sentences of their language. Since language acquisition must involve a lot of memorizing, clearly children must hear the words of their language in order to go about committing them to their mental dictionaries.

The Reinforcement Theory claims that children learn to speak like adults because they are taught to do so by being praised and otherwise rewarded for doing things right. At the same time, they are helped because parents correct them when they make mistakes.

Finally, the Active Construction of a Grammar Theory maintains that children invent the rules of grammar for themselves. It is not to say that the grammar that they invent isn't based on the language around them. This theory explains how children do things like produce incorrect past tense forms of verbs such as "goed" or "hitted". In addition, this theory explains how children are able to generate novel utterances that they have never heard or why they seem unable to be corrected from adults.

Writing Prompt: How does the information in the listening passage relate to the information in the reading passage?

Reading Passage (475 words): Criticisms of the Theories of Child Language Acquisition

You just read about the three main theories regarding child language acquisition. Now let's talk about some drawbacks of each theory.

Regarding the Imitation Theory, children are able to produce many things in the adult grammar that were not imitated. For example, a child may say "nana" for "banana," something that an adult would never say. Another problem with the Imitation Theory is that children make consistent errors that cannot be attributed to mispronunciation and which are still not ever heard in the adult grammar. When children make errors like "drewed" instead of "drew," it indicates that children cannot simply be memorizing because adults do not make these types of errors. The last criticism of the imitation theory is that it does not explain how children can produce and understand novel utterances. For example, when a child says, "My nose is crying.," which is something that an adult would never say, the Imitation Theory does not explain why children are able to produce this sentence when it was never received as input from an adult speaker.

There are two major flaws with the Reinforcement Theory. First of all, strangely enough parents do not actually correct children's grammar as much as we might think, and they do not praise them for using proper adult grammatical constructions either. What parents do seem to do is praise children for being truthful. For example, if a child says, "A dog wants to eat.," parents tend to correct the child if the sentence is not true, as in, "No Jimmy, the dog doesn't want to eat. It just ate." On the other hand, if children are truthful but produce ungrammatical sentences such as "Nancy goed to school yesterday.," parents often respond by saying, "Yes, she did.," without bothering to correct the child's use of "goed." The second flaw with the Reinforcement Theory is that even when parents attempt to correct a child's grammar, there is little evidence that it has any great effect on the language development of the child. In most cases, children seem determined to continue to produce incorrect forms despite correction from adults.

Perhaps the strongest of the three theories, The Active Construction of a Grammar Theory has two limitations. Firstly, it cannot be ignored that at least some language is acquired by imitating the sounds and words of the language of their caregivers or peers. We have all seen cases where children hear a bad word and then repeat the word at home without really knowing its meaning. Then the parents usually respond by saying, "Where did you hear that?" Secondly, all adults have corrected their children's grammar at some point, and they have also praised their children when they say something correctly. Therefore, at least some language to some degree must have been learned either because of the imitation theory or because of the correction of rules theory. Thus, even though the Active Construction of Rules Theory seems to explain in large part how children acquire language, it cannot explain completely how children learn a language.