

## Lecture One: Introduction to Psycholinguistics

### I) - Definition of Psycholinguistics or Psychology of Language:

#### Introduction

Psycholinguistics is the study of the psychological and neurobiological factors (the study of cells of the nervous system and the organization of these cells into functional circuits that process information and mediate behavior.) that enable humans to acquire, use, and understand language. Psycholinguistics covers the cognitive processes that make it possible to generate a grammatical and meaningful sentence out of vocabulary and grammatical structures, as well as the processes that make it possible to understand utterances, words, text, etc.

#### What is psycholinguistics?

Psycholinguistics is the study of psychological states and mental activity associated with the use of language. An important focus of psycholinguistics is the largely unconscious application of grammatical rules that enable people to produce and comprehend intelligible sentences. Psycholinguists investigate the relationship between language and thought, a perennial subject of debate being whether language is a function of thinking or thought a function of the use of language. However, most problems in psycholinguistics are more concrete, involving the study of linguistic performance and [language acquisition](#) , especially in children. The work of Noam [Chomsky](#) and other proponents of transformational grammar have had a marked influence on the field. Neurolinguists study the brain activity involved in language use, obtaining much of their data from people whose ability to use language has been impaired due to brain damage.

While linguistics studies the structure of natural language, psycholinguistics studies how people process natural language. A review of previous research will show that humans have a propensity for language that is far greater than any other species. Some argue that the complexity of human language is a reflection of the human mind's vast cognitive ability, and many believe that language is special and interestingly different from any other cognitive function.

## **II)- First Language Acquisition:**

Language acquisition is one of the central topics in cognitive science. Every theory of cognition has tried to explain it. Possessing a language is an essential human trait: all normal humans speak, no nonhuman animal does. Language is the main vehicle by which we know about other people's thoughts, and the two must be intimately related. Every time we speak we are revealing something about language, so the facts of language structure are easy to obtain; these data hint at a system of extraordinary complexity. Nonetheless, learning a first language is something every child does successfully, in a matter of a few years and without the need for formal lessons.

Language acquisition takes place mainly before the age of 5 years old. No child fails to learn a language (pathologies aside); and language acquisition is carried out in much the same way. In acquiring language, the child's linguistic knowledge passes through stages; each stage resembles the adult's linguistic knowledge until the child gains full competence. Children do not acquire their mother tongue by memorisation and repetition of sentences they hear in their immediate environment. Quite the reverse, children are continuously involved in the creative activity of constructing and comprehending new sentences which they have never experienced before. In fact, what they do is building a grammar of the language they are learning, a mental system of rules and principles, a theory of their language which makes them able to produce and understand all the sentences of the language.

The very difficult task and the very short time in which it is acquired, added to the poor quality of the language material the child is exposed to (parents, mothers in particular, sometimes even imitating child's language) confirm the assumption that human beings are born with the disposition to learn language. However, the role of the environment is very important. With no linguistic input- i.e. speech from the surrounding environment- to provoke the acquisition process, a child will not learn a language.

### **Theories of First Language Acquisition**

Linguists and psychologists have long addressed the issues of language acquisition and its mechanisms. Many of them, however disagree on many points. The behaviourist school of psychology emphasises the role of the environment and the role of standard methods in language development. Others and mainly those who belong to the generative school hold that

human beings are born with the ability to learn a language. Others like Piaget and his followers assert that language acquisition is linked to the cognitive development in the child.

The following sections will discuss briefly these theories.

### **1- The Behaviourist Theory:**

The advocates of this theory assert that the linguistic behaviour like any other kind of behaviour is a result of a chain of **stimuli and responses**. Language learning is a result of responses to a given stimulus that is positively reinforced so as to become automatic.

Children learn their first language by imitating the speech of adults they hear and by keeping a certain response (for example a certain answer to a certain question) when it is positively reinforced, and rejecting another response when it is negatively reinforced by the environment. Imitation and reinforcement are considered two complementary methods the child uses to acquire his mother tongue.

### **2- The Nativistic Approach:**

Human beings are born with a mental device which is called **(LAD) Language acquisition device** which enables them to acquire language.

Thanks to this device or **language faculty**, the child when exposed to linguistic input from the outside environment, even if it is poor, will construct a mental system representing the language of his community, a grammar provided to him by the language faculty.

The advocates of this approach are Noam Chomsky and his school of Generative Grammar who believe that humans are born with the capacity of constructing a grammar with highly specified properties. According to this view, imitation and reinforcement are not valid methods for language acquisition since the child does not learn his language as a set of habits.

### **3- The Cognitive Approach:**

The proponents of this approach refuse the specific mental faculty that enables language acquisition hypothesised by the nativistic approach. They rather believe that this knowledge is

determined by general cognitive principles. Piaget describes the linguistic development in the child as an interaction between his developing cognitive capacities and linguistic experience.

Though we still need a lot of information to decide which of these theories is more valid, all what is suggested in them plays an important role in language acquisition.

**End of Lecture One!**