

Unit One: basic concepts of language and its acquisition

I. What is language?

1. Language as a form of human communication

The term 'language' can be used to refer to a variety of concepts / things, such as

- According to Sapir (1921 : 8) , “language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas , emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols .”
- Bloch & Trager (1942 : 5) state that “ a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates “
- Hall (1968 : 158) states that language is “ the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols “.
- Chomsky (1957 : 13) considers language “to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences . Each sentence is finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements “.

N.B.

Human beings can communicate with each other, they can exchange knowledge, beliefs, opinions, wishes, threats, commands, thanks, promises, declarations, and feelings – only our imagination sets limits. one laughs to express amusement, happiness, or disrespect, he can smile to express amusement, pleasure, approval, or bitter feelings, and shriek to express anger, excitement, or fear, he can clench his fists to express determination, anger or a threat, he can raise his eyebrows to express surprise or disapproval, and so on, but his system of communication before anything else is language. Communication by means of language may be referred to as linguistic communication, the other ways – laughing, smiling, shrieking, and so on – are types of non-linguistic communication.

2. Characteristics of human language (Yule, 1996)

Displacement

This is the ability to use language to talk about times, places and people other than the 'here and now'.

Arbitrariness

This means that there is generally no natural, inherent relationship between the signs (i.e. sounds or letters) we produce and their meaning. When language tries to mirror or 'echo' the sounds made by animals and objects this is called **onomatop(o)eia**.

Productivity

This is an important characteristic of human language allowing us to continuously create new utterances, combining the 'building bricks' of language in ever new ways, whether these be sounds, words or sentences. Human languages are therefore continually evolving.

Cultural Transmission

This refers to how languages are acquired by our children. The assumption is that there is no genetic component (although Noam Chomsky challenges this with his theory of Universal Grammar) which would enable a child to simply start speaking e.g. English at a certain age, but rather that children need to be exposed to a language (and culture) in order to acquire it.

Duality

Duality (or '**double articulation**') refers to two separate layers of language working together to provide us with a pool of sounds which we can combine to communicate with one another. On the one hand, we have a limited number of **discrete sounds** (e.g. the 44 phonemes in English) which in isolation have no inherent meaning e.g. *b*, *i*, or *n*. On the other hand, we have a virtually unlimited number of distinct meanings which we can create by combining these sounds in certain ways e.g. *bin*, or *nib*. Various other combinations such as **bni* are not meaningful in English, but could possibly be in other languages.

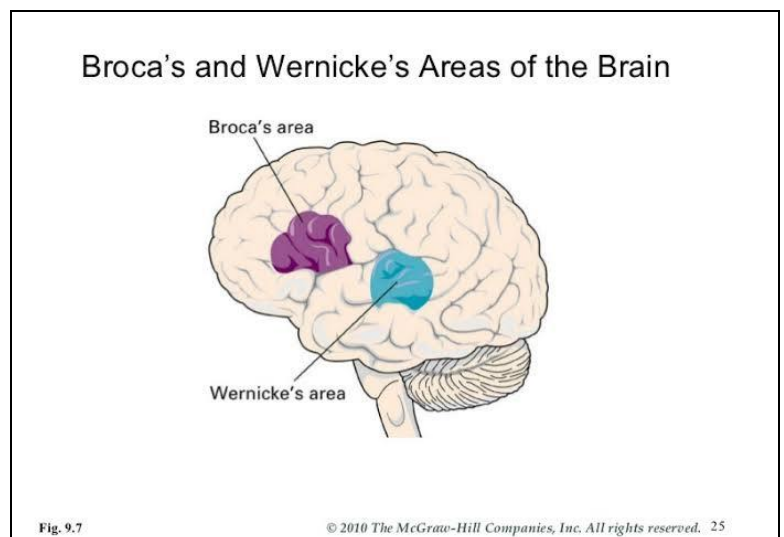
Other features of human language

- **reflexiveness**, which means that we are able to use the language to talk about language – which is typically what linguists do.
- **Discreteness** is also something that is said to distinguish human languages from other forms of animal communication. It means that the sounds of a language differ sufficiently from one another for a (native) speaker to distinguish them and thereby know which sign with which meaning is being used at any one time.

Language and the brain

Language is a cognitive skill and one therefore whose roots are situated in the evolution of the brain. We do not know exactly when our ancestors began to speak (estimates vary from 30,000 – 100,000 years ago), or even what triggered them to do so, but once they started, there was no stopping them. From such humble beginnings the 5,000 – 6,000 languages we assume to exist today have evolved.

Research mainly on **language aphasia** has been able to show that there are two major areas of the brain specialised in language processing, production and comprehension: **Broca's** and **Wernicke's areas**, situated in the left hemisphere and named after the two physicians who first discovered them in the 19th century.



3. LANGUAGE FUNCTION

A language **function** refers to what humans do with language as they engage with content and interact with others. Functions represent the active use of language for a specific purpose. They use language functions in order to express ideas and communicate with others.

Halliday's function	Description	Example
Instrumental: I want	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> getting things done satisfying material needs 	"I want a banana!" "Excuse me Mrs H, can you help me with the computer?"
Regulatory: Do as I tell you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> influencing the behaviour, feelings or attitudes of others includes the language of rules and instructions 	"You mustn't take things that don't belong to you." "First I ... you need a rake and you have to build over the rake."
Interactional: Me and you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> getting along with others to include or exclude 	"Can I please have a go after you?" "Do you like cricket too Henry?"
Personal: Here I come	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expressing individuality and personal feelings making public his/her own individuality 	"I know that song 'cause we sang it at Kindergarten." "And ... I've got a dog!"
Heuristic: Tell me why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> seeking and learning using language to explore his/her environment a way of learning about things 	"We could make a water thing to tell how much rain we got." "Why?"
Imaginative: Let's pretend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> creating stories, games and new worlds linguistic play including poems, rhymes and riddles not necessarily 'about' anything at all 	"Does this hurt when I bend it? You have fractured your leg really bad girl!" "Alice the camel has one hump, one hump, one hump."
Representational: I've got something to tell you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> communicating information conveying a message with specific reference to the processes, persons, objects, abstractions, qualities, states and relations of the real world around him/her 	"I made these earrings with pink and purple beads!" "It is raining really heavy and heavy all day."

Adapted from Halliday, M. A. K. 1969, 'Relevant models of Language', in 2003, *The Language of Early Childhood*, Continuum, London.

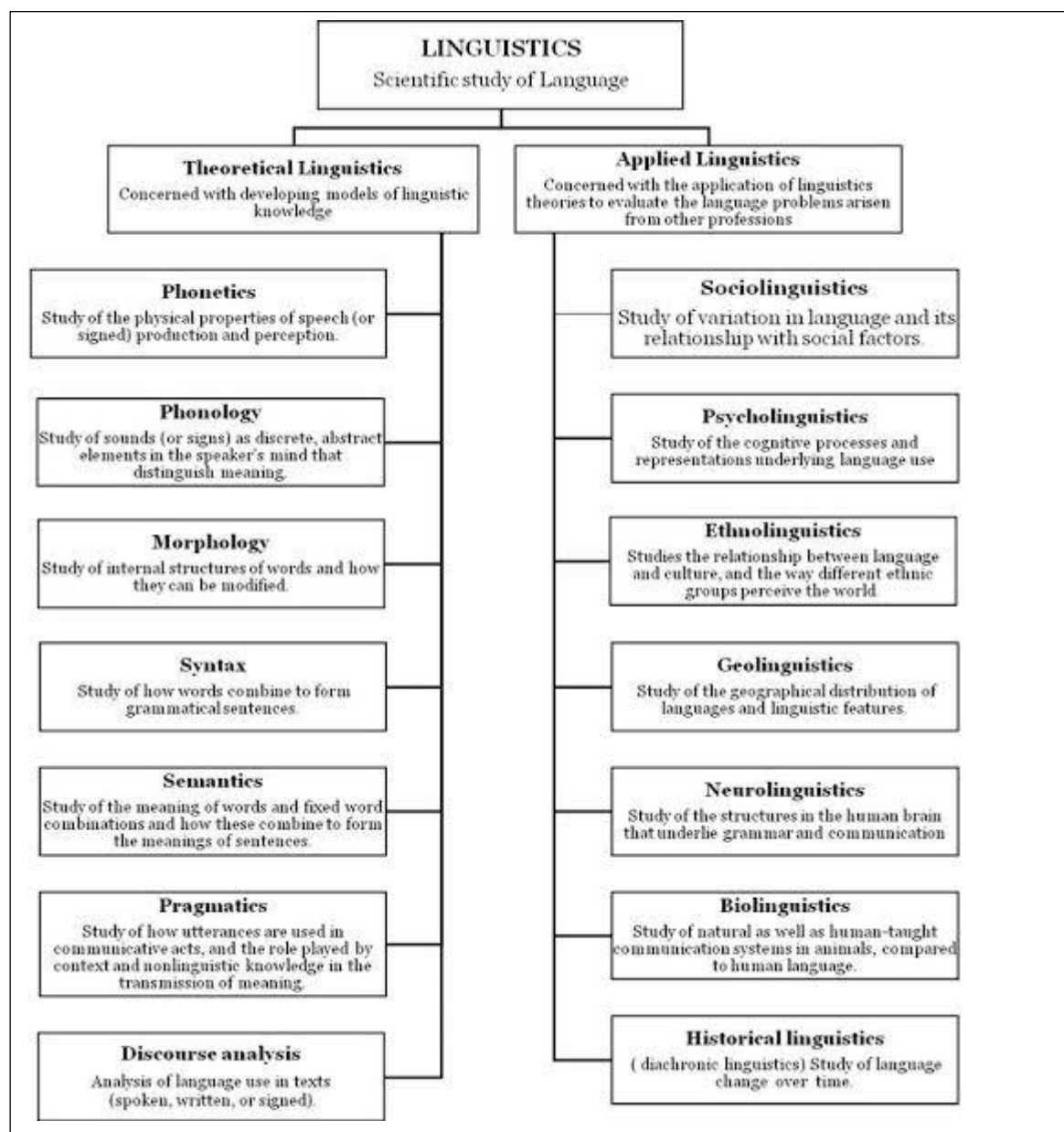
II. What is linguistics?

Every human knows at least one language, spoken or signed. Linguistics is the science of language, including the sounds, words, and grammar rules. Words in languages are finite, but sentences are not. It is this creative aspect of human language that sets it apart from animal languages, which are essentially responses to stimuli.

1. Important distinction of linguistics (De Saussure dichotomy)

<p>Descriptive---</p> <p>To describe the fact of linguistic usage as they are, and not how they ought to be, with reference to some real or imagined ideal state.</p>	<p>Prescriptive---</p> <p>A term used to characterize any approach which attempt to lay down rules of correctness as to how language should be used.</p>
<p>Synchronic (linguistics)---</p> <p>languages are studied at a theoretic point in time: one describes a 'state' of language, disregarding whatever changes might be taking place.</p>	<p>Diachronic----</p> <p>languages are studied from point of view of their historical development – for example, the changes which have taken place between Old and Modern English could be described in phonological, grammatical and semantic terms.</p>
<p>Langue---</p> <p>the language system shared by a community of speakers</p>	<p>Parole---</p> <p>the concrete act of speaking in actual situations by an individual speaker.</p>
<p>Competence----</p> <p>a person's knowledge of his language, the system of rules which he has mastered so that he is able to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences, and to recognize grammatical mistakes and ambiguities.</p>	<p>Performance---</p> <p>the actual realization of language knowledge, language seen as a set of specific utterances produced by language speakers, as encountered in a corpus.</p>
<p>Functionalism or functional linguistics</p> <p>It refers to the study of the form of language in reference to their social function in communication. It considers the individual as a social being and investigates the way in which she/he acquires language and uses it in order to communicate with others in her or his social environment.</p> <p>Representative: M. A. K. Halliday, Systemic functional grammar</p>	<p>Formalism or formal linguistics</p> <p>It is the study of the abstract forms of language and their internal relations. It fixes on the forms of languages as evidence of the universals without considering how these forms function in communication and the ways of social life in different communities.</p> <p>Representative: Noam Chomsky, Transformational-generative grammar</p>

2. Branches of linguistics



III. Language Acquisition and learning

Henceforth, modern linguists have been trying hard to crack the codes which govern the acquisition and learning of a language. Theories ranging from Jean Piaget's Cognitive Theory(1929), Skinner's Behaviorist Theory (1957), to Chomsky's The Innateness Hypothesis, and Lambert's Critical Period Hypothesis(1967) for first language acquisition, and finally Krashen's 5 hypothesis of second language learning have paved a way for an insight, a way to unravel the way the mind works in acquiring and learning a language -which happen to be distinct from one another-, and here, we will be looking at the theories that have been the workhorse of language acquisition and learning.

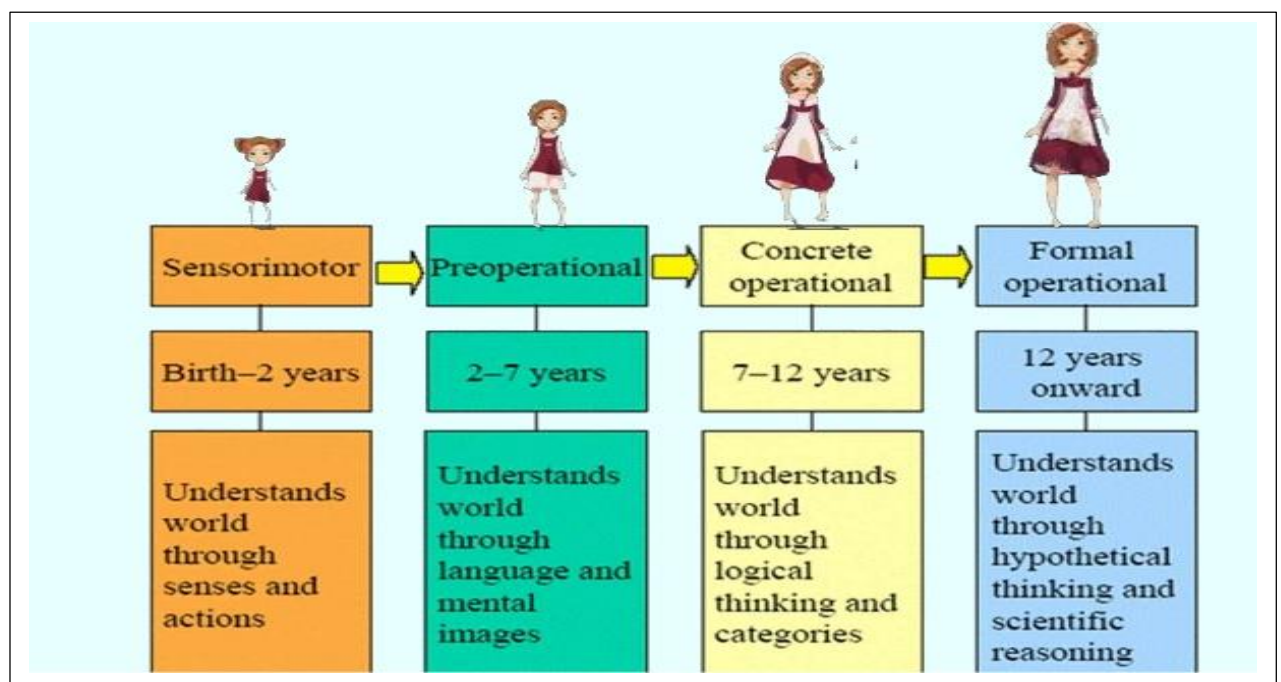
1. Definition of language acquisition and learning

Language acquisition versus language learning		
Language acquisition	Language learning	
is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. It involves the picking up of diverse capacities including syntax, <u>phonetics</u> , and an extensive <u>vocabulary</u> . Language acquisition is opposed to learning and is a subconscious process similar to that by which children acquire their first language (Kramina, 2000: 27).	Language learning is broadly defined as developing the ability to communicate in the second / foreign language, Language learning is a conscious process, is the product of either formal learning situation or a self-study programme (Kramina, 2000: 27).	
First language versus second language		
	First language	Second language
DEFINITION	The language a person acquires first, mainly by listening to people around his or her communicate	Any language a person uses in addition to his or her native language: this is learnt after first language.
ACQUISITION	Language acquisition is natural and effortless process.	Language acquisition may require time and effort
COMPETENCY	Most competent	Not as competent as the first language
KNOWLEDGE	Although not necessarily knowledgeable about every grammatical rule. Usually have a good sense about language rules through the experience.	May not be completely familiar with the idiomatic expressions and grammar rules.

2. Theories of language acquisition and learning

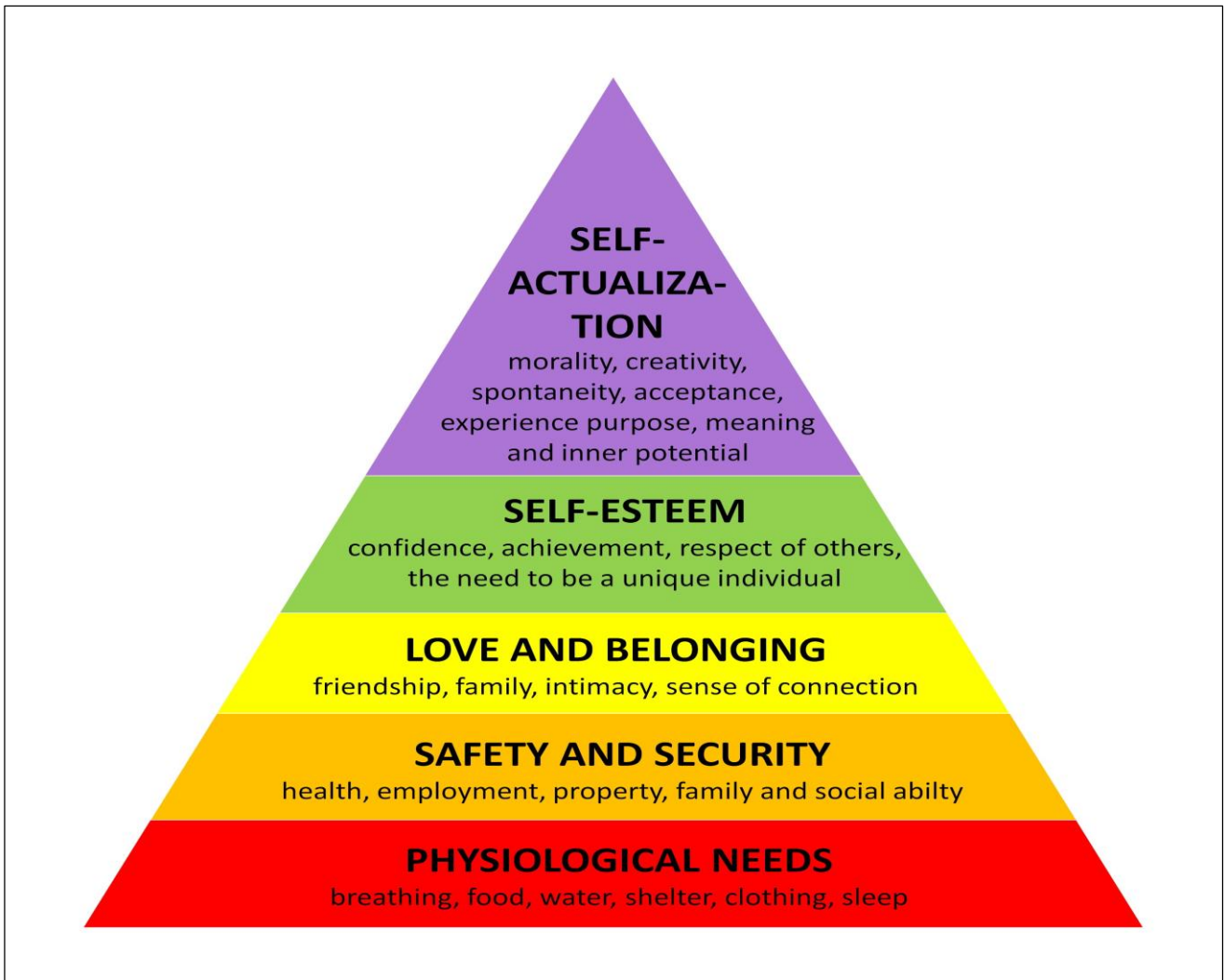
2.1. Cognitive Development Theory

Most psychologists would agree that The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget was the most influential developmental psychologist of the twentieth century. Largely as a result of his work, cognition has been a major focus in child development research since the late 1950s when his work was translated from French into English.



2.2. Humanistic Approach (Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers)

Maslow and Rogers believed that the best motivation for humans was the need of personal growth and fulfilment in life, this means that humans want to grow Psychologically and continue to enhance themselves (McLeod, 2015). Maslow introduces his Hierarchy to display the importance scale.



2.3. Behaviorist Theory

The behaviourist B. F. Skinner then proposed this theory as an explanation for language acquisition in humans. In *Verbal Behaviour* (1957), he stated:

"The basic processes and relations which give verbal behaviour its special characteristics are now fairly well understood. Much of the experimental work responsible for this advance has been carried out on other species, but the results have proved to be surprisingly free of species restrictions. Recent work has shown that the methods can be extended to human behaviour without serious modifications."(cited in Lowe and Graham, 1998, p68)

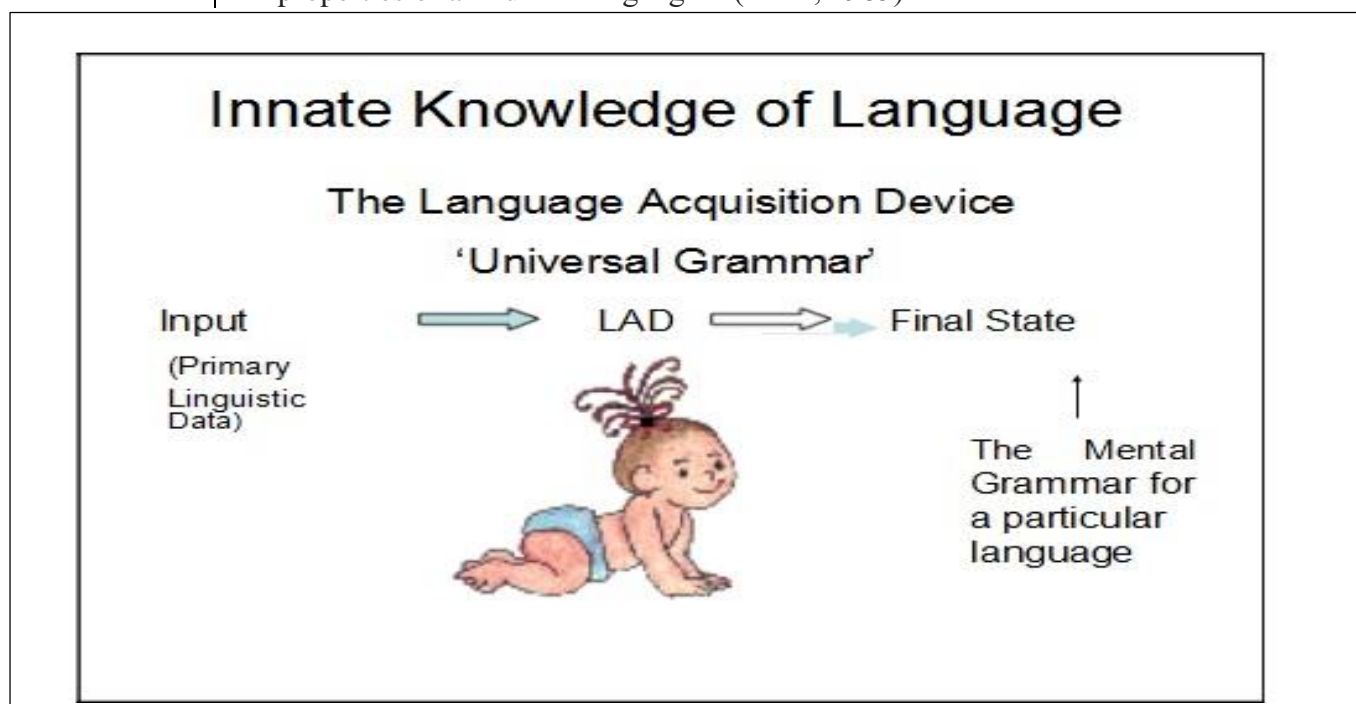
Skinner suggested that a child imitates the language of its parents or carers. Successful attempts are rewarded because an adult who recognises a word spoken by a child will praise the child and/or give it what it is asking for. Successful utterances are therefore reinforced while unsuccessful ones are forgotten.

Behaviourist Model (only study observable / external behaviour)



2.4. The Innateness Hypothesis

- Noam Chomsky believes that children are born with a language acquisition device (LAD) which encodes the major principles of a language and its grammatical structure into the child's brain and thus possesses an inherited ability to learn any human language.
- Chomsky defends the **innate hypothesis** in terms of an elaborated linguistic theory which postulates not only a general ability in humans to acquire language, but also the ability that comes from a specific language acquisition device in the brain, equipped already at birth with specific grammatical rules and principles.
- The **LAD** reflects Chomsky's underlying assumption that many aspects of language are universal (common to all languages and cultures) and constrained by innate core knowledge about language called Universal Grammar. Universal grammar is defined by Chomsky as "the system of principles, conditions and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages" (Cook, 1985).



Learning activity: in a brief account, explain Krashen's five hypotheses of second language acquisition.

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