

Theories of language development

- Attempts to understand human language development date back to 7th century B.C.
- Five theories covered in Owens (2008) chapter 2:
 - Behavioral
 - Syntactic
 - Semantic/Cognitive
 - Sociolinguistic
 - Emergentist
- Be prepared to compare and contrast ideas among these theories

Nature versus Nurture

- Debate is really a continuum
 - Most human talents are probably both born and made
- Different theories tend to focus on different aspects of language
 - Biases and preferences of researchers
 - Need to limit research questions
- Debate became heated in 1960s and 1970s
 - Skinner 1957
 - Chomsky 1959
 - Brown 1973

Behavioral Interpretation

- Rooted in behavioral psychology (Skinner)
- "Empiricist" from word empirical, meaning must have evidence
- Only study behavior that can be measured or observed
- No study of mental states or internal structures
- Although mental and internal exist, cannot study what cannot observe
- Goal to be able to predict future behaviors

Language is like other behaviors

- At early stage, language is a simple behavior
 - Language is a habit
- Child is passive in language-learning process
 - Language models in the environment “fill up” the child
 - Child imitates models
- Environment is critical: Differences among children considered evidence of effect of environment

Classical Conditioning

- Pavlov's dog
 - Meat powder = Unconditioned stimulus (UCS)
 - Salivating = Unconditioned response (UCR)
 - Bell = Conditioned stimulus (CS)
- Word learning
 - Object of desire = UCS
 - Physiological response = UCR
 - Word = CS
 - A CS word becomes a UCS and elicits another word that is associated with it
- Classical Conditioning, or associationism, is used mostly to explain receptive language learning and word learning/vocabulary

Operant Conditioning

- Operant
 - any behavior that can be increased or decreased by responses that follow it
- Reinforcement
 - A consequence that causes behavior to increase
 - Environmental consequences can increase or decrease human behavior
 - Children's speech is rewarded by parents
- Punishment
 - A consequence that causes behavior to decrease
- Antecedent
 - The preceding event to the target behavior that causes the target behavior or controls the frequency of behavior

Behavioral Terms

□ Shaping

- Reinforcement of a series of small behaviors that gradually approximate the target behavior
- Successive approximations
 - Example: "du" "ju" "juice" "juice please" etc.

□ Chaining

- Many complex behaviors are really a series of chained behaviors with multiple stimuli, reinforcers, etc.
 - Example: Computer skills
- Each word becomes the stimulus for the next word in the sentence
 - Example: "The boy hit the ball"

Evaluation of Behavioral Theory

□ Limitations

- Role of imitation is not certain
- Children say things adults don't say
 - "I broked it"
- Cannot count on reinforcement from parents
 - Parents correct for meaning not form
- Inadequate explanation of complex language
- Cannot account for novel or creative utterances

□ Contribution

- Learning plays a part
- Learn language of parents
- Intervention ideas
