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Theories of language learning: A contrasting view

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Is language a capacity originating primarily from the brain, or a system originating primarily from the environment? Is it “genetically endowed and readymade” or “environmentally fashioned and evolving”? In other words, is it the progeny of innate knowledge of some kind latent in the brain, or the progeny of the environment of the child; or is it neither this nor that; or more than this and that? This article is meant to explore and investigate these questions. In doing so, the article explores a number of theories in the field of first and second language acquisition; theories such as those advocated by Bloomfield, Skinner, Chomsky, and Halliday.

Key words: Language acquisition, genetic capacity, process, innate knowledge, environment, social interaction, behaviourists, mentalists, environmentalists, sociolinguistic, social semiotic.

INTRODUCTION

Bloomfield, Skinner, Chomsky, and Halliday, advocates of four different theoretical approaches or positions to language acquisition and language learning, have each significantly contributed to the study of language, making it a distinct field of study, and an autonomous scientific discipline. Structuralism, behaviourism, cognitivism, and the social semiotic are the four schools or views adopted by the four aforementioned scholars, respectively. Each of these approaches or views concerned in a way or another with “the logical problem of language acquisition” introduces one of the main theories of first and second language acquisition. Within this context, this paper explores and contrasts the positions and philosophies underlining the structuralist, behaviourist, innatist, and socio-linguistic approaches to language acquisition or learning, espoused by Bloomfield, Skinner, Chomsky, and Halliday, respectively.

In doing so, the paper also brings into light the theoretical views of a number of other linguists and psychologists on the highly contentious but equally interesting topic of language acquisition and learning and language development, and the transmission of culture and the construction of reality through language.

Language acquisition, this “logical problem”, as formulated by Chomsky, has for generations baffled and intrigued linguists, psychologists, researchers, and language teachers and practitioners everywhere. Different explanatory proposals and various approaches and theories have been put forth in endeavours to

account for this marvellous human phenomenon, and indeed “the greatest intellectual feat anyone of us is ever required to perform” (Bloomfield, 1933 cited in Fromkin and Rodman, 1998: 317).

Child first and second language acquisition, this feat, unique only to homo sapiens, becomes even more baffling and more intriguing as we study the potential of simultaneous childhood bilingualism, of raising children who can be bilingual or trilingual or indeed even polyglots since their very early days. According to Lightbown and Spada (1999: 3) “there is a considerable body of research on the ability of young children to learn more than one language in their earliest years. The evidence suggests that, when simultaneous bilinguals are in contact with both languages in a variety of settings, there is every reason to expect that they will progress in their development of both languages at a rate and in a manner which are not different from those of monolingual children”. Thus, they conclude (1999: 4) that “children who have the opportunity to learn multiple languages from early childhood and to maintain them throughout their lives are fortunate indeed, and families that can offer this opportunity to their children should be encouraged to do so”.

EARLY CHILDHOOD BILINGUALISM

Crystal (2003: 11) asserts that “young children acquire

more than one language with unselfconscious ease". Many other linguists and researches in the area of language acquisition have unanimously agreed that children have the capacity to acquire their native languages with ease and success. This unselfconscious ease and marvellous capacity of young children for acquiring language within a remarkably short time are indeed phenomenal. This becomes even more phenomenal when children who are exposed to two or three or more languages can acquire them with the same ease and success. According to Crystal (2003: 17), "children are born ready for bilingualism". He further adduces that "some two-thirds of the children on earth grow up in a bilingual environment, and develop competence in it".

Bilingual acquisition or the acquisition of two languages simultaneously or sequentially is a marvel that concerns linguists, language teachers, and parents who speak two different languages or who can provide a bilingual environment for the child since birth. Typically, this could be the case of a spouse of different extraction or even two spouses of the same origin but one is capable of speaking a foreign or a second language. This is typical, for example, of Arabic or French or Malay language teachers teaching English as a second or foreign language.

People and even some language teachers and researchers are divided as whether the child should be exposed at an early age to more than one language simultaneously, or that focus should be on the first language first alone, and only after the child has mastered the syntactic structures of the first language can he be exposed to a second language. Each side has its own battery of reasons why simultaneous bilingualism or the simultaneous introduction of a second or third language should or should not be encouraged.

Opponents of early bilingualism believe that simultaneity of language acquisition right since birth is detrimental in three respects. First, it slows down or retards the learning of the first native language. Secondly, it would affect the child's cognitive development and his abilities of reading, arithmetic and other mental processes (Steinberg et al., 2001). Thirdly, it would confuse the child and thus, affect his mastery of either language due to the child's inability to distinguish between two different and complex emerging grammars/systems. Besides these concerns or reservations or (mis) conceptions levelled against early bilingualism is the fear of subtractive bilingualism, a case in which the child's native language may completely or partially get lost as another system is taking hold when the child's first language skills have not yet been fully mastered (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

Proponents of early bilingualism, however, state that what may sound or look for an adult as confusion or retardation is not as it actually seems and that the child is aware of the presence of two grammars or systems or

languages operating simultaneously and differently; but that he is in need of some time to sort them out. Lightbown and Spada (1999: 4), along with those who share their view, as noted earlier, conclude that "children who have the opportunity to learn multiple languages from early childhood and to maintain them throughout their lives are fortunate indeed, and families that can offer this opportunity to their children should be encouraged to do so".

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

How does language acquisition occur? This is a question or rather a conundrum that has puzzled and intrigued many minds for generations. Early language acquisition, this seemingly effortless, indeed far from being operose, extraordinary feat, common to all children brought up in normal environments, is not only a perplexing puzzle but also an impressive fact of the marvellous innate capacities the Almighty Allah has endowed the rational animal with. Indeed, as Dan (1994, quoted in Fromkin and Rodman, 1998: 317) states, "the capacity to learn language is deeply ingrained in us as a species, just as the capacity to walk, grasp objects and recognize faces. We do not find any serious differences in children growing up in congested urban slums, isolated mountain villages, or in privileged suburban villas". Indeed, nothing can actually be thought of as more remarkable than the child's extraordinary ability to construct his or her "meaning potential", (Halliday, 1975), the potential of "what can be meant", (Halliday, 1975: 124) the potential of the semantic system, the semantic options or paradigms that make up this meaning potential. In lucid terms, Brown (2000) describes eloquently the capacity of children to acquire language as follows:

Everyone at some time has witnessed the remarkable ability of children to communicate. As small babies, children babble and coo and cry and vocally or non-vocally send an extraordinary number of messages and receive even more messages. As they reach the end of their first year, children make specific attempts to imitate words and speech sounds they hear around them, and about this time they utter their first "words." By about 18 months of age, these words have multiplied considerably and are beginning to appear in two-word and three word "sentences"-commonly referred to as "telegraphic" (or "holophrastic") utterances- such as "allgone milk," "bye-bye Daddy," "gimme toy," and so forth. The production tempo now begins to increase as more and more words are spoken every day and more and more combinations of two- and three-word sentences are uttered. By about age three, children can comprehend an incredible quantity of linguistic input; their speech capacity mushrooms as they become the generators of nonstop chattering and incessant conversation, language thereby,

becoming a mixed blessing for those around them. This fluency continues into school age as children internalize increasingly complex structures, expand their vocabulary, and sharpen communicative skills. At school age, children not only learn what to say but what not to say as they learn the social functions of their language (Brown, 2000: 21).

Towards the end of this vivid discription of the universal pattern that children go through in their process of language acquisition, Brown (2000: 21) asks, "How can we explain this fantastic journey from that first anguished cry at birth to adult competence in a language? Is it from the first word to tens of thousands? From telegraphese at eighteen months to the compound complex, cognitively precise, socio-culturally appropriate sentences just a few short years later?" These are the sorts of questions to be addressed in this paper.

As stated earlier in this preamble or orientating background, a number of theories of language acquisition have been put forth to explain this extraordinary aptitude of children for acquiring languages. Besides the role of the social milieu or environment, what all such theories are in a way or another meant to account for is "the working of the human mind". They all "use metaphors to represent this invisible reality" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 45). For example, "some theories give primary importance to learners' innate characteristics; some emphasize the role of the environment in shaping language learning; still, others seek to integrate learner characteristics and environmental factors in an explanation for how language acquisition takes place" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 31). The difference, for example, between the position of the innatists and that of the connectionists is that while the former view "language input in the environment as a 'trigger' to activate innate knowledge", the latter see such input as "the principal source of linguistic knowledge" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 42). Interactionists, another group of theorists of language acquisition, on the other hand, "emphasize the role of the modification of interaction in conversations" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 45) as the primary means to language acquisition. As such, connectionists and "interactionists attribute considerably more importance to the environment than the innatists do" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 22).

Thus, and apart from Halliday's socio-linguistic conception of language learning, theorists are either mentalist or environmentalist in their approaches about language learning. Consequently, Halliday (1975) states that from the mid 1960 are onwards, two conceptions of language learning dominated the scene: that viewing language learning as "genetically endowed and readymade" and that viewing language learning as "environmentally fashioned and evolving" (Halliday, 1975: 139).

In the following pages, following a brief section on the key linguist whose work has revolutionized, linguistic thought

by breaking with tradition and heralding a new era of linguistic inquiry, we shall shed light on four of these positions or theories of language acquisition and language learning: structuralism, behaviourism, innatism, and Halliday's socio-linguistic approach.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 to 1913), "the father of modern linguistics", the linguist whose work was described as a "Copernican revolution in Western linguistic thought" (Harris and Taylor, 1989: 177), the terminus ad quem for a certain long-held view of the focus of linguistic research, the one who viewed language as a "stable, structured system" (Harris and Taylor, 1989: xviii), and the linguist from whom we date the era of structural or descriptive linguistics, made a useful distinction between two levels of language whose usefulness gave birth to structuralism, behaviourism, innatism, and other schools of thought.

Saussure, "whose posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) launched 20th century structuralism on its course", (: xviii), claimed that "there was a difference between parole (what Skinner "observes", and what Chomsky", though with some difference, "called performance) and langue (akin to the concept of competence, or our underlying and unobservable language ability)" (Brown, 2000: 10). So, while parole or speech/speaking or what Chomsky later called performance or E-language (Chomsky, 1986) is the external or "outward manifestation of language (Brown, 2000: 10.), langue or language or what Chomsky called competence or I-language (Chomsky, 1986) is the internal hidden "abstract system" of language (Aitchison, 1974: 30). "The distinction is a useful one, since it recognizes the need for idealisation and abstraction, as well as, concern with actual data" (Aitchison, 1974: 30).

Saussure stated the importance of langue, the deep abstract structure that generates parole. However, as mentioned in the following paragraph, examination of langue has to be done through the examination of parole, though this was not Saussure's focus:

Saussure focused not on the use of language (parole, or speech), but rather on the underlying system of language (langue) and called his theory semiology. However, the discovery of the underlying system had to be done through examination of the parole (speech). As such, Structural Linguistics is (sic) actually an early form of corpus linguistics (quantification). This approach focused on examining how the elements of language related to each other as a system of signs, that is, 'synchronically' rather than how language develops over time, that is, 'diachronically'. Finally, he argued that linguistic signs were composed of two parts, a signifier (the sound pattern of a word, either in mental projection, as when we silently recite lines from a poem to ourselves

or in actual, physical realization as part of a speech act) and a signified (the concept or meaning of the word). This was quite different from previous approaches which focused on the relationship between words and the things in the world that they designate (Wikipedia).

As we shall see in our discussion of structuralism, behaviourism, and innatism, in later years, different schools of thought gave more importance to one of those two levels of logos: parole and langue, at the expense of the other.

Structuralism: An overview

Structuralism can be defined or described as “an approach in academic disciplines in general that explores the relationships between fundamental principal elements in language, literature, and other fields upon which some higher mental, linguistic, social, or cultural “structures” and “structural networks” are built. Through these networks the meaning is produced within a particular person, system, or culture” (Wikipedia). “This meaning then frames and motivates the actions of individuals and groups. In its most recent manifestation, structuralism as a field of academic interest began around 1958 and peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Wikipedia).

Before we move to structuralism in linguistics, and Bloomfield’s version of structuralism, it is important that we make clear what Saussure meant by the term ‘structural’ or “structural linguistics”. According to Saussure, as put in the words of Aitchison (1974: 21), structural linguistics “does not refer to a separate branch or school of linguistics. All linguistics since de Saussure is structural, as structural in this sense merely means the recognition that language is a patterned system composed of interdependent elements rather than a collection of unconnected individual items”. Thus, Saussure’s conception of “structural” is far more comprehensive than that of Bloomfield as we shall see subsequently.

Bloomfieldian structuralism

Influenced by Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, in his notable work *Language* (1933), endeavoured, through the creation of his own version of structuralism, to “lay down a rigorous framework for the description of languages” (Aitchison, 1974: 33). According to Brown (2000: 8), Bloomfield stated that ‘only the “publically observable responses” could be subject to investigation. The linguist’s task, according to the structuralist, was to describe human languages and to identify the structural characteristics of those languages’. Thus, Bloomfield’s focus was on parole or speech: the observable or “outward manifestation of language”. He, along with other structural or descriptive linguists of the 1940s and 1950s,

“chose largely to ignore langue and to study parole” (Brown, 2000: 10). As noted by Aitchison (1974):

Bloomfield considered that linguistics should deal objectively and systematically with observable data. So he was more interested in the forms of a language than in meaning. The study of meaning was not amenable to rigorous methods of analysis and was therefore, he concluded, ‘the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state’ (Aitchison, 1974: 33).

Due to Bloomfield’s negligence of meaning and his description of it as something that is beyond investigation, “the influence of Bloomfieldian structural linguistics declined in the late 1950s and 1960s” (Wikipedia). In its place, “the theory of Generative Grammar developed by Noam Chomsky came to predominate” (Wikipedia).

Brown (2000: 10) mentions that the “revolution brought about by generative linguistics broke with the descriptivist preoccupation with performance of the outward manifestation of language-and capitalized on the important distinction between the overtly observable aspects of language and the hidden levels of meaning and thought that give birth to and generate observable linguistic performance”.

Parole or speech or performance or simply meaning, as noted earlier, had no place in Bloomfield’s work. His preoccupation was “with the way items were arranged to form a total structure, to the exclusion of all other aspects of linguistics” (Aitchison, 1974: 21-22). In other words, Bloomfield was concerned with grammar in its narrow sense.

Chomsky, however, as we shall see when we discuss innatism, has been concerned more with langue or what he calls I-language or competence, which refers to “speakers’ linguistic knowledge” (Fromkin and Rodman, 1998: 12) of the languages they speak. He has shifted attention away from detailed descriptions of actual utterances, and started asking questions about the nature of the system which produces the output (Aitchison, 1974). Thus, in his 1986 book: *Knowledge of Language: Its nature, origin, and use*, Chomsky, according to Grundy (2000: 183) “describes how generative linguistics shifted the focus in language study ‘from the study of language regarded as an externalized object to the study of the system of knowledge attained and internally represented in the mind/brain’”. Chomsky’s central, thought-provoking question, according to Fromkin and Rodman (1998: 340) was: “What accounts for the ease, rapidity and uniformity of language acquisition in the face of impoverished data?”

In other words, Chomsky is more intrigued by langue, the hidden abstract system or structure or mechanism which gives birth to parole. He takes the marvel of parole of children as a catalyst or a galvanizing epiphany to dig

deep in the human brain to investigate this underlying hidden system that exponentially generates parole or the enviable and amazing inborn human predisposition to speech that in a relatively short period of time makes young children veritable chatterboxes.

Bloomfieldian linguistics concentrated on describing sets of utterances which happened to have been spoken. As mentioned by Aitchison (1974: 78), Chomsky criticized Bloomfieldian linguistics by stating that it was “both far too ambitious and far too limited in scope. It was too ambitious in that it was unrealistic to expect to be able to lay down foolproof rules for extracting a perfect description of a language from a mass of data. It was too limited because such grammars had no predictive power. They catalogued what had happened, but did not predict what would happen”.

Behaviourism

Behaviourism, “a psychological theory of learning”, was advocated by Skinner (1904-1990) in his *Verbal Behavior*, published in 1957. In his highly criticized *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner attributed learning to imitation, practice, reinforcement or positive feedback and habit formation.

Behaviourism is “behaviour that can be observed and measured”. In this sense, behaviourism is close to Bloomfieldian structuralism. Just like structuralism, behaviourism’s focus is on parole, performance, and on the outward observable aspects of language, not langue, the holistic, internal, abstract and unobservable system of language.

Lightbown and Spada (1999: 9) mentioned that “children imitate the sounds and patterns which they hear around them and receive positive reinforcement (which could take the form of praise or just successful communication) for doing so. Thus, encouraged by their environment, they continue to imitate and practise these sounds and patterns until they form ‘habits’ of correct language use”. Thus, for the behaviourists, imitation and practice are the essential mechanisms for the language to be acquired or learned.

While Skinner’s view of language learning does actually, at least on the intuitive level, explain some aspects of language acquisition, the fact remains that it is short of giving an adequate explanation for the complexities of language acquisition. As Lightbown and Spada (1999: 15) point out, “imitation and practice alone cannot explain some of the forms created by the children. They are not sentences that they heard from adults. Rather, children appear to pick out patterns and then generalize them to new contexts”.

My own child, Muhammad, at the age of 23 months, for example, knowing how a spider looks like, once at the sight of my hairy chest, pointed to my chest, and much to my delight, excitedly exclaimed, “Spider!” In another

incident, I discovered that he used to refer to his carrycot as “ship”, which indeed looked like a ship. No one had ever told him that that was a ship, but he creatively, and because of a vocabulary gap, thought of it as a ship. Likewise, the over generalization of the hair of my chest, which to him, resembled the tiny and many feet (eight actually in number) of a spider was never made by any adult around him. On another occasion, at the age of 2 and 10, at the sight of a boat sailing in the sea, Muhammad jubilantly shouted, “The boat is swimming”. His choice of the word “swimming”, though, inappropriate due to an age-induced vocabulary gap, is nonetheless creative and novel. His word choice is creative in the sense that it serves the communicative purpose; and novel in the sense that no adult had previously said that. Such *sui generis* productions, frequently produced by children, and creativity and novelty on their part, render the behaviourist theory for language acquisition at best insufficient.

Furthermore, it has been observed that “the rules children construct are structure-dependent. That is, children use syntactic rules that depend on more than their knowledge of words and also relied on their knowledge of syntactic structures which are not overtly marked in the sentences they hear” (Fromkin and Rodman, 1998: 340). It has also been observed that “child grammar is rule governed at every stage” (Aitchison, 1974: 153). That is, the grammar of a child is systematic rather than haphazard. An “example of the rule-governed nature of child language are forms such as *mans*, *foots*, *gooses*, which children produce frequently. Such plurals occur even when a child understands and responds correctly to the adult forms, *men*, *feet* and *geese*; this is a proof that a child’s own rules of grammar are more important to him than mere imitation” (Aitchison, 1974: 154).

According to Fromkin and Rodman (1998: 329), “the ‘imitation’ theory cannot account for another important phenomenon. Children who are unable to speak for neurological or physiological reasons learn language spoken to them and understand what is said. When they overcome their speech impairment they immediately use the language for speaking”. In the words of Lightbown and Spada (1999: 36), “for second language acquisition, as for first language acquisition, the behaviourist account has proven to be at best an incomplete explanation for language learning”. Now, we turn our attention to another more complex theory of language acquisition. That is, the theory of the innatists or innatism as advocated by Noam Chomsky whose critical views of Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* cannot be more vehement.

Innatism

Chomsky’s idea about the existence of innate properties of language to explain the child’s mastery of languages in

a remarkably short time despite the highly abstract nature of the rules of language has rocketed linguistics and child language acquisition research to the sky (Aitchison, 1974). For Chomsky, linguistic behaviour is innate, not learned. He argues that children are “biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in just the same way that other biological functions develop” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 15). According to Brown (2000: 24), Chomsky argues “that we are born with a genetic capacity that predisposes us to a systematic perception of language around us, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language”. So “while behaviorism looks at what can be observed and measured, cognitivism is about what occurs in the head of the learner”. Such Chomskyan view of language acquisition has given birth since the late 1950s to what has come to be known as generative linguistics, “the programme of linguistics investigating language as a biologically endowed cognitive faculty (Cook, 2003: 128).

The notion of innateness with its proposition of the LAD (Language Acquisition Device) and its much later developed hypothesis of Universal Grammar has successfully managed in casting strong doubts about the sufficiency of Skinner's theories of operant conditioning and imitation in his *Verbal Behavior*. It showed, as we have seen and as Brown (2000), and Aitchison (1974) pointed out how limited the behaviouristic, stimulus-response (S-R) theory is in accounting for the generativity or productivity of child language; aspects of meaning, abstractness, child's creativity and the remarkably short period for acquiring a huge mammoth task like language acquisition which Chomsky's seminal nativist approach or model has accounted for more adequately child language acquisition and the ‘innateness hypothesis’

According to Aitchison (1974:151), “few people in the 1950s queried the processes by which language was acquired. Most assumed that children imitated the adults around them, and that their speech gradually became more accurate as it moved closer to the models they were copying. There seemed to be little mystery attached to this straightforward process”. Aitchison (1974), however, further states that Chomsky and his disciples: drew attention to several interesting points-points that are so obvious and had been overlooked in many previous studies. Firstly, children acquire language in a remarkably short time. The major part of acquisition is crammed into approximately eighteen months (eighteenth-thirty-sixth month). And all children, even relatively stupid ones, do this seemingly effortlessly and competently. Secondly, adult speech is the only apparent source of data from which a child works in achieving this mammoth task. Yet, adult speech is extremely confusing. There are numerous unfinished sentences and semi grammatical utterances as to how children extract a grammar from this jumble (Aitchison, 1974: 151).

It is possible here to argue that the presumed idea of adults' ungrammaticality or semi-grammaticality is a myth

as Labov's (1970) studies showed; and that some other linguists such as Bellugi and Brown (1964) had found that the speech addressed to children is carefully orchestrated and grammatically precise. This is to a great extent true but the question to be addressed here is whether what mothers (or whoever takes care of the child) utters to their children enough to make them speak fluently in a few years later. According to Chomsky and his followers as mentioned by Aitchison (1974):

‘Children must be born with some innate knowledge of the deep structure of the properties of language (for example, LAD and UG)’. They acquire language so easily and fast because they know, in outline, what it is they have to learn. Every child has a ‘blueprint’ of language universals in his brain. All he has to do is to discover how his own language fits into these universal patterns. In transformational terms, a child has innate knowledge of universal deep structures. All he has to learn are the relevant transformations for converting this deep structure into the surface realization of his own language (Aitchison, 1974: 151-152).

As mentioned by Lightbown and Spada (1999: 36), “Chomsky's theory of language acquisition is based on the hypothesis that innate knowledge of the principles of Universal Grammar (UG) permits all children to acquire the language of their environment, during a critical period in their development”. Thus, they further state that according to Chomsky, “children's minds are not blank slates to be filled merely by imitating language they hear in the environment; instead, he claimed that children are born with a special ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 16).

This genetic capacity or this innate knowledge of language, however, can only be harnessed in the presence of a social milieu in which the child can have the opportunity to engage in personal conversations and social interaction. Absence of such social milieu will forego the opportunity for the child to acquire language. A child who is brought up in isolation of any social contact, for example, will not acquire language. Therefore, for such innate linguistic knowledge to be activated, the child must be brought up in a normal environment. The role of the environment in activating such innate knowledge can be likened to the trigger of a gun. A gun that is loaded with bullets cannot be made use of unless the trigger is pulled. Only then can bullets be fired.

Thus, as Lightbown and Spada (1999: 15) mentioned, “the environment makes a basic contribution-in this case, the availability of people who speak to the child. The child, or rather, the child's biological endowment will do the rest. This is known as the innatist position. Chomsky proposed his theory in reaction to what he saw as the inadequacy of the behaviourist theory of learning on imitation and habit formation (Chomsky, 1959)”.

Indeed, the ease, creativity, novelty, rapidity, uniformity, systematicity, regularity, structure-dependence, the rule-governed nature of child grammar, and a host of other characteristics of child language make the theories of imitation, reinforcement, and analogy obsolete as accounts accounting for this most extraordinary feat every one of us in their early lives goes through seemingly effortlessly and brilliantly. These views as Fromkin and Rodman (1998: 331) states "cannot account for the non-random mistakes children make, the speed with which the basic rules of grammar are acquired, the ability to learn language without any formal instruction, and the regularity of the acquisition process across diverse languages and environmental circumstances".

HALLIDAY AND LANGUAGE AS A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC

Now, we begin to explore the Hallidayan conception of language and language learning. With reference to the aforementioned, this section seeks to explore Halliday's socio-linguistic approach to language learning, (b. 1925) his elaborate work and view of language as a social semiotic.

Besides the key words, 'function', 'system', and 'choice' in Halliday's work on language and learning, which drive the whole theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) or simply functional grammar, 'culture', 'text', and 'context' also feature as significant terms in his writings on language, particularly, in his theory of 'language as a social semiotic'. Language as a social semiotic is the view that the semiotic system or language as a semiotic system, away from "the language system itself" (Halliday, 1975: ix) operates within the social context of a culture, and that culture is being learnt and transmitted through language, on the one hand and produced by language on the other. Thus, 'a child, in the act of learning language, is also learning the culture through language and the semantic system which he is constructing becomes the primary mode of transmission of the culture' (Halliday, 1975: ix-x). Those terms, amongst others feature especially, in this theory views language as a social semiotic.

According to this view, language and culture are brought together where language or semiotic meanings in general are constituted by and interpreted within the context of culture and where culture is constituted and interpreted in turns through language or semiotic signs. In the words of Halliday (1975: 139), "The social semiotic is the system of meanings that defines or constitutes the culture; and the linguistic system is one mode of realization of these meanings". Thus, when we talk about language as a social semiotic, we talk about culture and context, or what Halliday (1978) calls the socio-cultural context. Therefore, language is interpreted within the context of culture, and this culture is interpreted in terms that are semiotic. Therefore, culture and language are

bound together. Language takes shape in a particular culture, and that culture is shaped and interpreted by a particular language, hence, Halliday's view of language as a social semiotic.

Before we proceed any further, it is worthwhile to note at this point that Halliday's view of language as a or the social semiotic comes within the context of language learning and how a child learns his mother tongue, that is, how he builds up what Halliday (1975) calls "meaning potential, that is the potential of "what can be meant", "the potential of the semantic system", the semantic options or paradigms that make up this meaning potential (Halliday, 1975: 124).

Thus, following his aforementioned quoted definition of the social semiotic, Halliday (1975: 124) states: "The child's task is to construct the system of meanings that represents his own model of social reality. This process takes place inside his head; it is a cognitive process. But it takes place in contexts of social interaction, and there is no way it can take place except in these contexts". Halliday (1975: 139-140) further states: "As well as being a cognitive process, the learning of the mother tongue is also an interactive process. It takes the form of the continued exchange of meanings between self and others. The act of meaning is a social act". Therefore, for Halliday, language learning is a process, not a capacity that is both cognitive and interactive, that is, the social semiotic of which the linguistic system is "one mode of realization", is a system or network of meanings that develops gradually and progressively as the child cognitively grows through (maturation and) social interaction. "He builds the semiotic of his own society, through interaction in family, peer group, and, later, in school-as well as, in a host of other micro semiotic encounters" (Halliday, 1975: 143-144).

Halliday's description of language as a social semiotic reflects the notion that it is through language that a social system and a semantic system are constructed "In the process of building up the social semiotic, the network of meanings that constitutes the culture and the child becoming a member of the species 'social man'" (Halliday, 1975: 121). Through language, the child learns the culture, and culture is the receptacle in which language and other semiotic systems take place and operate. "The reality that the child constructs is that of his culture and sub-culture, and the ways in which he learns meanings and build up registers are also those of his culture and sub-culture" (Halliday, 1975: 143). Thus, both language and culture are semiotic systems which make up the social system. "In principle, a child is learning one semiotic system, the culture, and simultaneously, learning the means of learning it and a second semiotic system is the language" (Halliday, 1975: 122).

For Halliday, language is a social phenomenon; it exists in a social context. Thus, language is social because it takes place within the social context of culture; and is semiotic because "the culture itself is interpreted in

semiotic terms" (Halliday, 1978). It is interesting to note, at this point, that this view differs from that of Saussure (1857-1913) who views language as only semiotic. Halliday's conception of language as socio-semiotic or socio-linguistic is more comprehensive and more in line with language as operating only in a socio-cultural context.

However, it seems that Halliday's notion of language as social is derived from Malinowski's (1884-1942) concepts of context of culture and context of situation, "as modified and made explicit by Firth" (Halliday 1975: 125). According to Firth (1968), for language to operate, a context of culture, and that of situation are needed. One can also say that the notion of language as semiotic, as alluded to earlier, might have been inspired by Saussure who viewed language as semiotic. However, whether Halliday was influenced by Firth and Saussure is not an issue. The fact remains that it was Halliday who developed our conception of language through his conception of language as social and semiotic together, rather than social alone or semiotic alone, hence his socio-semiotic or social semiotic which is a sophisticated conception of language as stated in the following extract:

Halliday's theory of "language as a social semiotic" is a very sophisticated, elaborate, "extravagant" (Halliday, 1994) socio-cultural theory of language, which really builds upon, extends, earlier theories of language and culture and language as social interaction. Its sophistication is in the way Halliday specifies the semiotics of the culture at the level of grammatical constituent, at the level of clause (<http://golum.riv.csu.edu.au/~srelf/SOTE/EML504/Halliday.htm>). So, in his formulation of his theory of language as a social semiotic, it is clear that Halliday has built upon other works that treated language from a socio-cultural perspective.

A prominent figure, here, would be Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) whose socio-cultural theory of language and learning was based on his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or the level of language development a child or learner is capable of when interacting with an adult or a more advanced peer or proficient learner. Thus, unlike Chomsky (1928) and the innatists, and even Halliday to a certain extent, Vygotsky concludes, as stated in Lightbown and Spada (1999: 23) that "language develops entirely from social interaction"

While Chomsky views language as an innate capacity, as being rooted in the human brain, Halliday views language as a social semiotic, as "a set of systems of semantic choices" (<http://golum.riv.csu.edu.au/~srelf/SOTE/EML504/Halliday.htm>), based on the process of cognitive development and human interaction with and experience of the world, rather than the brain. Thus, "Unlike Chomsky's view of language as a syntactic system innate in the mind, Halliday's theory of language is as a set of finite interlocking systems of semantic choices, which are

realised in wordings, or lexico grammatical structures: in vocabulary and syntax" (Chomsky, 1928).

Hasan also "argued that language is not a capacity we carry around in our brains, rather, it is a resource, a cultural resource (Hasan, 1996). Thus, Halliday's theory is not just a theory of language, it is a theory of behaviour; not in the sense of Skinner's theory of behaviour, but in how, through interactions we become cultural subjects, so that our lives embody our culture with all its complexities, ambiguities and contradictions (<http://golum.riv.csu.edu.au/~srelf/SOTE/EML504/Halliday.htm>). Thus, in *Language as Social Semiotic*, published in 1978, Halliday (1994: 23) writes:

The child learns his mother tongue in the context of behavioural settings where the norms of his culture are acted out for him and enunciated for him in settings of parental control, instruction, personal interaction and the like; and, reciprocally he is 'socialized' into the value systems and behaviour patterns of the culture through the use of language at the same time as he is learning it.

Another prominent figure who can be thought of as espousing the interactionist position as an explanation for language acquisition and learning is the Swiss psychologist, Piaget (1896-1980). Again, unlike the innatists who view language as stemming primarily from one particular localized region of the brain, as opposed to social interaction, and thus, operating independently of other cortical organs or encephalic, or brain functions, the notion known as the modularity of the brain, (Fromkin and Rodman, 1998: 35), Piaget views language learning and development as stemming from social interaction. In the words of Lightbown and Spada (1999: 23), "Unlike the innatists, Piaget did not see language as based on a separate module of the mind".

Chomsky and the innatists see the role of the environment or social interaction as only a trigger. However, Halliday (besides cognitive development) and interactionists, see it as everything. Therefore, while Chomsky and the innatists see logos as originating primarily from the mind, and hence their emphasis on innatism, Halliday (also unlike interactionists who see only interaction as the cause behind learning) sees logos as operating in the mind but taking place in contexts of social interaction, and hence, his emphasis on social interaction. Hence, the notion of language as 'social' is rooted in the research of interactionists or those holding the interactionist position (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 23) in language acquisition and language learning, those who deem (modified) social interaction or the role of the environment, as opposed to the brain or any innate capacities, as the key in the process of language acquisition and language development throughout life.

So, Halliday's depiction of language as social and that it is a social phenomenon, and exists in a social context is not new. However, as we have seen in the aforementioned extract, what is new and indeed

sophisticated is the combined notion of language as social semiotic together, which brings “the semiotics of the culture at the level of grammatical constituent, at the level of clause” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 23). Hence, it is not only the context of situation where semiotic signs operate but also the socio-cultural context of culture where socio-cultural signs operate as well. It is semiotics within a socio-cultural context, it is the operation and development of semiotic systems of which language is one within the social context of culture and situation, hence, again, Halliday’s sophisticated observation or notion of language as the social semiotic, and the network or system of meanings constitutes the culture.

CONCLUSION

Within the context of language acquisition and language learning, this article explored and investigated the views and philosophies of each of Bloomfield, Skinner, Chomsky, and Halliday regarding important issues in language, and linguistics. Put very briefly, the article stated that children have a marvellous capacity for acquiring competence in whatever language or languages they get exposed to, and in a manner so rapid, creative, uniform, systematic, regular, and easy compared with the mammoth task that they, within a remarkably short span of time accomplish victoriously.

In endeavours to account for this fantastic journey that begins with an anguished cry at birth and culminates in adult competence in language, linguists have offered a number of theories or approaches to language acquisition. Drawing on Saussure’s useful distinction between what he called parole and langue, most theories, apart from Halliday’s, gave paramount importance to either the role of the environment, or hidden innate properties. Thus, we have seen two major approaches or polar positions regarding the source of linguistic knowledge: the environmentalists who view language as “environmentally fashioned and evolving” and the mentalists who view language as “genetically endowed and readymade” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 139). While behaviourists, connectionists, and interactionists (with some variation) are examples of the first position, the cognitivists or innatists are examples of the second, the mentalists. Halliday, however, sees language as taking place in the mind but shaped and constructed in contexts of social interaction.

Within the scope of this article, we have seen that Skinner and Bloomfield are examples of the former position which is amenable to measurement and observation, investigation and scrutiny. Chomsky and his acolytes focus more on the latter position, the mentalist or intraorganism approach, the langue or the hidden and unobservable aspects of language.

Halliday, whose explanation, in my opinion, is the best so far, on the other hand, views language or linguistic knowledge as the product of both social interaction and

cognitive development. Hence, Halliday seems to acknowledge both langue and parole. However, unlike Chomsky who looks at language from a psychological point of view and is thus concerned with the question of how language is stored and processed in the mind, hence, his innatist account - Halliday who looks at language from a sociological or socio-linguistic point of view is more concerned with the questions of why and how children learn language, and “what people do with language and how language mediate meaning,” hence, is his socio-linguistic or socio-semiotic view or account of language. Thus, according to Chomsky, children learn language because they are biologically programmed to do so, the brain is programmed or predisposed genetically in a way that would make them acquire it; and they do that through the LAD or (the “core” or general principles of) UG. For Halliday, however, children learn language for the purposes of communication and interaction; and they do that through using the resources of the language: semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology. Thus, while Chomsky’s concern is about structure, Halliday’s concern is about use or function (“What people do with language and how languages mediate meaning?”).

Language acquisition and language learning with all their complexities “represent a puzzle for linguistic, psychological, and neurological scientists which will not soon be solved. Research which has development as its goal has very important long-term significance for language teaching and learning, but agreement on a ‘complete’ theory of language acquisition is probably, at best, a long way off” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 45).

The complexities of language acquisition will possibly continually remain a driving force for continuous attempts at more adequate explanations for this marvellous human feat with which Allah has distinguished the human being from all other living species.

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Appendix 1. Simultaneous childhood bilingualism: Muhammad's level of acquisition of the English language system by age 2: A corpus based on a parental diary of speech development (as part of the social semiotic the child is progressively constructing).

Nouns/ adjectives	Nouns/ adjectives	Nouns/ adjectives	Nouns/ adjectives	Verbs	Compound words	Phrases/phrasal verbs/adverbs/simple sentences and interjections
Hose	Car	Salad	Cola	Give	Car key	Dry your face
Hammer	Cat	Tasty	Shower	Take	Big car	Shake my hand
Pin	Donkey	Juice	Horse	Sleep	Football	How are you?
Bear	Monkey	Cake	Socks	Eat	Airplane	Speak to the parrot
Kiss	Cow	Bike	Shoes	Drink	Prayer mat	Give him a kiss
Clock	Ball	Sea	Purse	Open	Ice cream	Put it in the bin
Watch	Skip	Toothpick	Money	Come	Eyebrows	Sit down!
Quran	Pen	Shovel	button	Pray	Earlobe	Stand up!
(When seen or heard)	Pencil	Balloon	Glass	Wait	Peanuts	Go down!
Sheikh	Clip	Macaroni	Tea	Wake up	Corn flakes	Go up!
Hot	Spoon	Mortadella	Towel	Throw	Wind chimes	Close the door
Smart	Fork	Gun	Coffee	Want		Turn on/off
Lemon	Table	Swing	Rice	Spray (perfume)		Bring me...
Sour (lemon)	Glasses	Racket	Onion	Dress up		Bring the shoes to kill the roach.
Lion	Orange	Milk	Pepper	Put on		Look at some more of something
Switch	Kiwi	Truck	Banana			Take off your socks/shoes
Belt	Bread	Mouth	Glass			Give the bottle/stapler etc to someone.
Peg	Soup	Goat	Tea			Where is...
Hanger	Soap	Rabbit	Towel			Put it back...
Hair	Shampoo	Snake	Coffee			Come here!
Cheek	Hand	Nose	Rice			No
Chest	Ear	Bed	Onion			Go out!
Tummy	Head	Stone (of fruit)	Pepper			Bye!
Nipple	Face	Pip	Banana			Bravo!
Ass/ butt phone/	Shoulder(s)	Hat	Knee			Wow!
Telephone	Fingers	Elephant	Fart			Of course
Piano	Toes	Sun	circle			Use your right hand.
Duck	Tissue	Spit	bottle			Shoot the ball.
Goose	Plate	Disc	scissors			Shoot the man (with a gun).
Jeep	Flag	Cracker	bird			Good morning!
Moon	Cassette	Saucer	pillow			Bye! See you!
Perfume	Parrot	Pants	cushion			All right!
Lips	Book	Underpants	tap			Let go
Eye	Box	Shirt	receiver			Take off your socks/shoes
Singlet	Man	Tie	lid			Give the bottle/stapler etc to someone.
Diaper	Woman	Suds	flower			
Cock	Baby	Corner	tree			
Balls	Boy	Armpit	stapler			

Light	Girl	Blender	Chicken
Sky	Moustache	Garbage	Meat
Nostrils	Picture	Clothes	Fish
Smart	T.V.	Music	Chair
Neck	A.C.	Tumbler	Stool
Basket	Water	Incense	Enough
Cot	Shani (drink)	Cough	Spider
Biscuit	Wheel	Ankle	Heater
Chocolate	Battery	Laptop	Ship
Fan	Leg	Honey	Giraffe
Camel	Date	Rosary	Teeth
Dog	Ant	Yoghurt	Brush
Roach	Tongue	Door	Loofah
		Tail	Kitchen
			Chips
			Pocket
			Knife
			Candle
			comb
			gum
			window
			shorts

Appendix 2: Simultaneous childhood bilingualism: Muhammad's level of acquisition of the Arabic language system by age 2: A corpus based on a parental diary of speech development (as part of the social semiotic the child is progressively constructing).

الأفعال	الأسماء	الأسماء	الأسماء
سكر (الباب-الثلاجه)	جرافة	طيارة	فلفل
افتح (الباب-الثلاجه)	تخت	سيارة	دبوس
هاتى (تفاحة- موز)	شاورما	ثلاجة	قلم
روحي	فن	حمام	ساعه
تعال	أحيك	ماء	صورة
بدى (اكل)	تيتى	لحمه	فتوش
بديش	سيدو	تفاحة	عصفور
نام	بالون	موز	قشاطه
كمان (عصير - ماء)	ايدك	صابون	معلقة
أعطيتنى	رجلك	بوسه	سكين
طعميتنى	شاطر	عصير	زعر
اكل	كورن فليكس	سكر	حلوه
ترضع	حليب	علكه	فراشة
أقوم	برفان	شاي	قداحة
أقعد	كلوت	كاسه	مقص
البس	لين	فلافل	عينك
اشلح		صراصير	رأس
وقعتيها			مربي
بره			
يله			
خلص			
توجع			
غسل اديك			