

Noam Chomsky and Language Acquisition

Noam Chomsky is probably the best known and the most influential linguist of the second half of the Twentieth Century. He has made a number of strong claims about language: in particular, he suggests that language is an innate faculty - that is to say that we are born with a set of rules about language in our minds, which he refers to as the 'Universal Grammar'.

The universal grammar is the basis upon which all human languages build. If a Martian linguist were to visit Earth, he would deduce that there was only one language, with a number of local variants. He would be able to study the language and determine the rules based on the patterns he hears and the patterns of other languages.

Children do not simply copy the language that they hear around them. They deduce rules from it, which they can then use to produce sentences that they have never heard before. They do not learn a repertoire of phrases and sayings, as the behaviorists believe, but a grammar that generates an infinite number of new sentences.

Have you ever been around a toddler as they are acquiring new language? They suddenly change from "I play." to "I'm playing." without any formal instruction.

Children are born, then, with the **Universal Grammar** wired into their brains. This grammar offers a certain limited number of possibilities - for example, the word order of a typical sentence.

Some languages have a basic Subject Verb Object (or SVO) structure -- "The teacher gave a lecture."

75% of the world's languages such as English, French, and Vietnamese use either this structure or Subject Object Verb (SOV) including Japanese, Tibetan, and Korean; while others prefer Verb subject object (VSO) such as Welsh or Verb Object Subject (VOS) such as Malagasy.

Some languages, such as Latin, appear to have free word order, but even here, SOV is very common.

OSV is very rare - but you will find an example in the speech of Yoda, in Star Wars "Strong with the force you are."

Language rules are complicated and complex. If there is not a Universal Grammar, how do children make sense of it all?

When the child begins to listen to his parents, he will unconsciously recognize which kind of a language he is dealing with - and he will set his grammar to the correct one - this is known as '*setting the parameters*'.

It's as if the child were offered at birth, a certain number of hypotheses, which he or she then matches with what is happening around him. The child knows intuitively that there are some words that behave like verbs, and others like nouns, and that there is a limited set of possibilities for ordering them within a phrase. This is not information that the child is taught directly by adults, but information that is given for the child to decipher.

This set of language learning tools, provided at birth, is referred to by Chomsky as the **Language Acquisition Device**.

Summary

Chomsky has contributed a great amount of insight in the area of language development.

Key Concepts:

- Some language ability is innate.
- A Universal Grammar exists for all languages.
- Children are equipped with a Language Acquisition Device.