

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

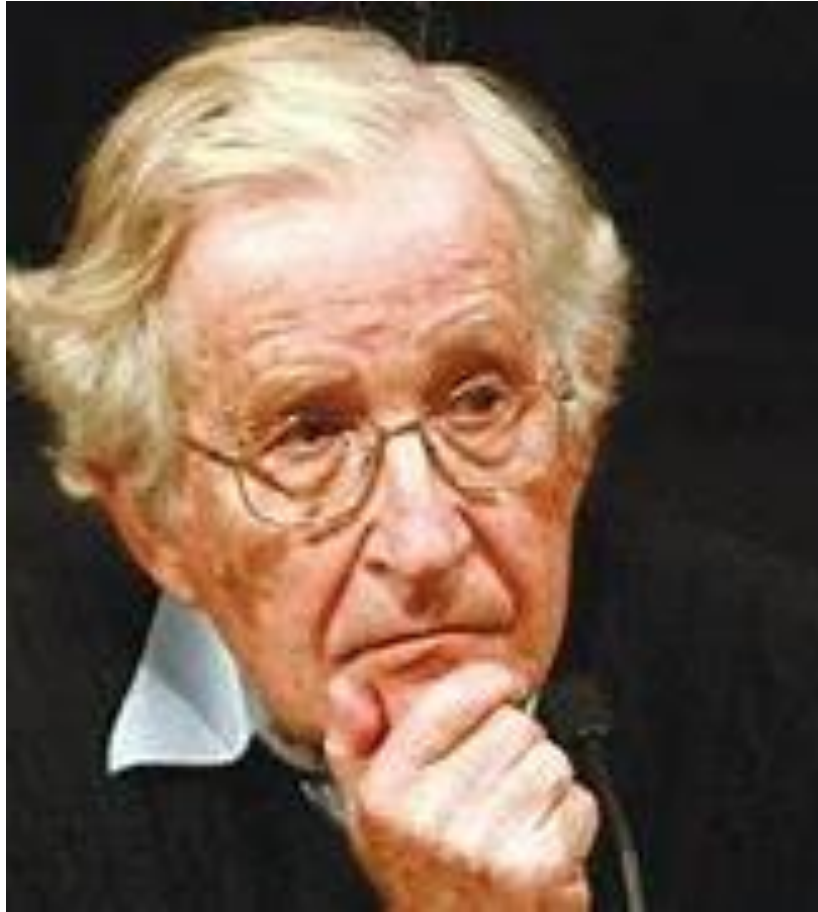


DR. NOUR TOUMI



OUTLINE

1. Defining language acquisition
2. Stages of language acquisition
3. Theories of language acquisition
4. Behaviourist theory
5. Chomsky critique to behaviourism
6. Nativist Theory
7. Criticism of Nativism



“Language acquisition seems much like the growth of organs generally; it is something that happens to a child, not a child does. And while the environment plainly matters, the general course of development and the basic features of what emerges are predetermined by the initial state, a common human possession” Noam Chomsky



“Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.”

- John B. Watson

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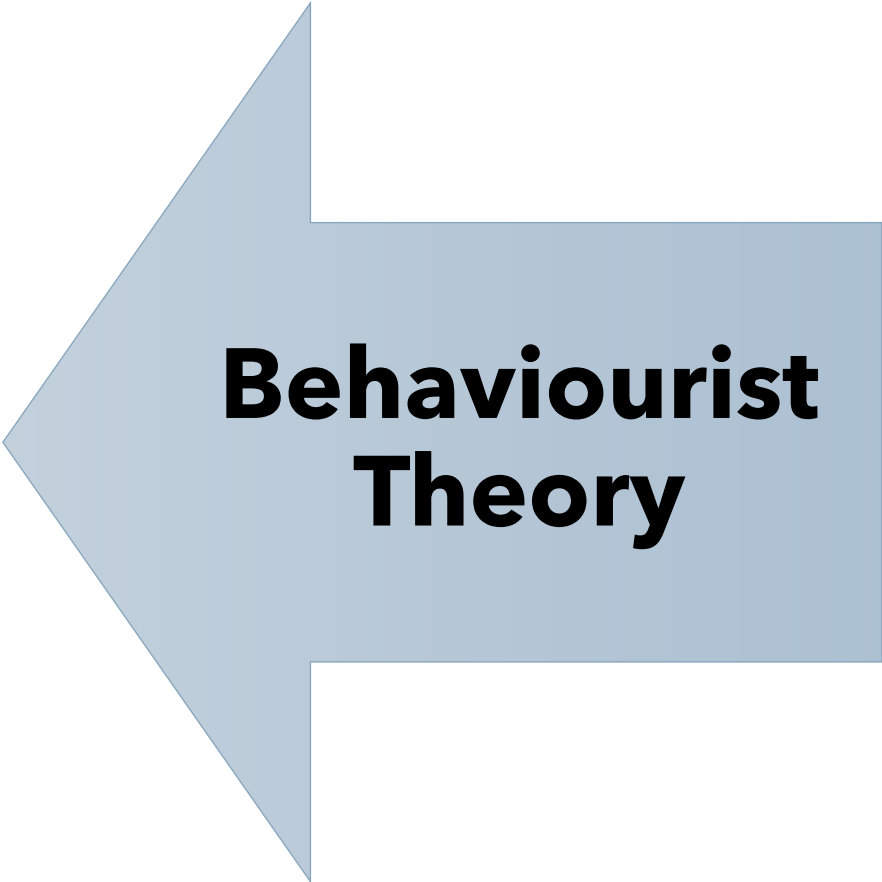
Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive language, as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate.

Stages of child language acquisition




Phase	Time	Explanation
"Babbling"	6-8 months	The child produces sounds such as 'mama' or 'dada' (also called CV), which don't count as actual words.
"One-word"	9 months to 1.5 years	The child says their first singular words
"Two-word"	1.5-2 years	The child forms 'mini sentences' with plain semantic relations
"Early multiword"	2-2.5 years	The child creates "telegraphic", concise, sentence structures using morphemes that don't change the meaning of the word, but alter it to fit the sentence
"Later multiword"	2.5 years onwards	The child uses functional structures (functional structures are morphemes that change the meaning of the word)

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION



**Behaviourist
Theory**



**Nativist
Theory**



Ivan Pavlov



Edward Thorndike

Behaviorism

F.B. Skinner



John Watson

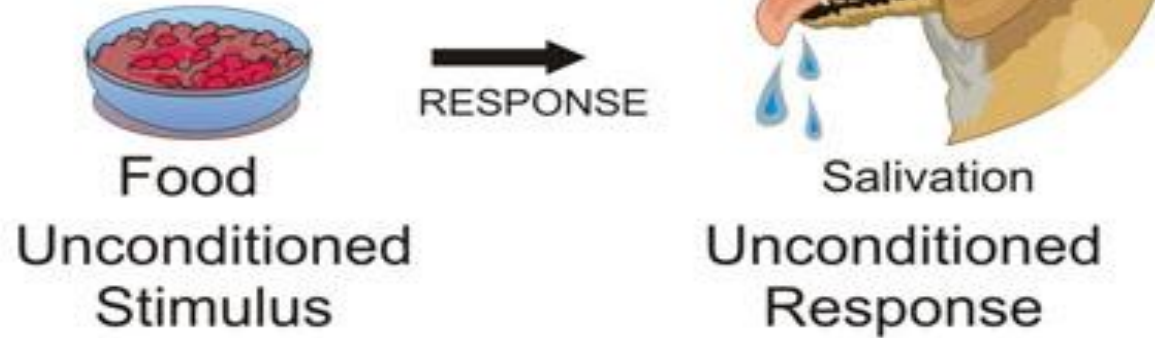


BEHAVIOURISM MAIN BELIEFS

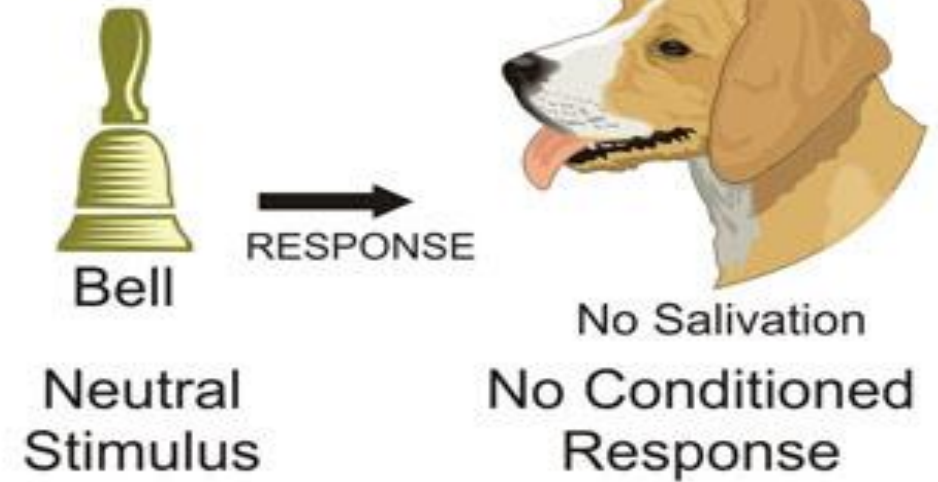
- Language has long been thought of a process of imitation and reinforcement.
- Children start out as clean slates and language learning is process of getting linguistic habits printed on these slates.

- Language acquisition is a process of experience.
- Language is a "conditioned behaviour": the stimulus response process.
- Stimulus → Response → Feedback → Reinforcement

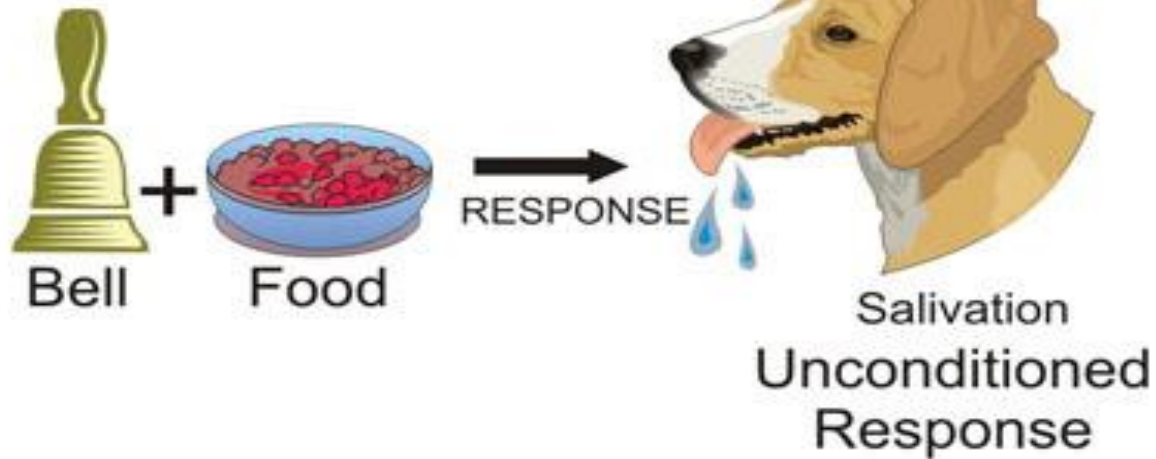
1. Before Conditioning



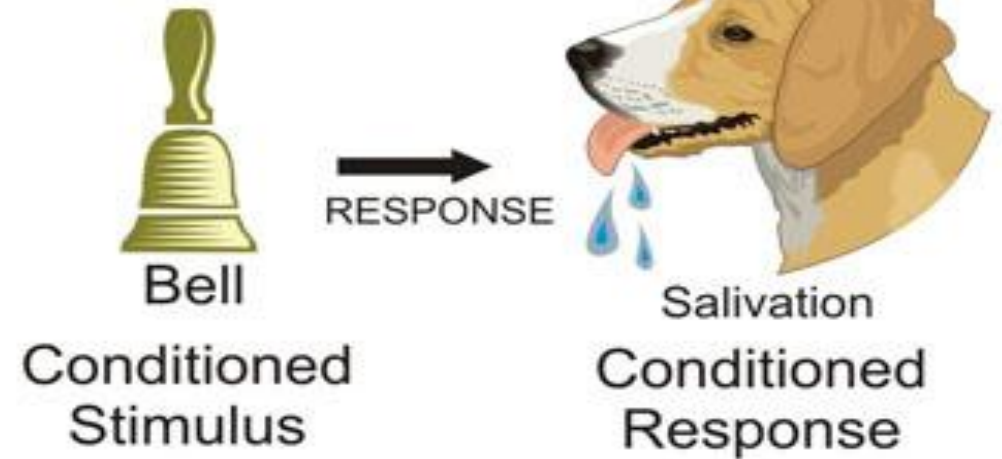
2. Before Conditioning



3. During Conditioning

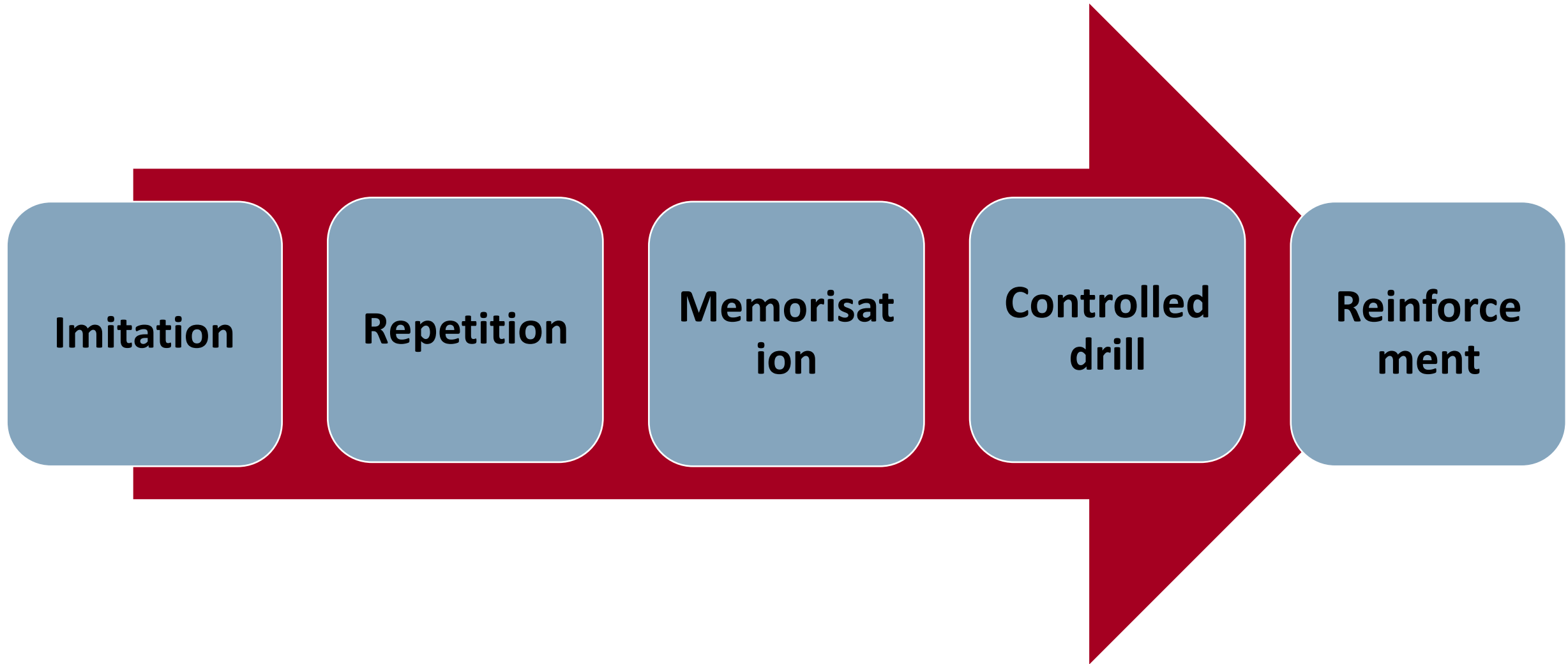


4. After Conditioning



Classical Conditioning

- Thus, children learn language step by step



Burrhus Frederic Skinner



Procedure

Behavior

Consequence

Change in behavior

Use of positive reinforcement

Behavior
(Studying)



Positive reinforcer
(Teacher approval)
is *presented*
when student studies



Use of negative reinforcement

Behavior
(Studying)



Negative reinforcer
(Teacher disapproval)
is *removed*
when student studies



CHOMSKY'S CRITICISM TO BEHAVIOURISM

- Children seem unable to exactly imitate adult grammatical constructions, consider the following example, David McNeill (1933)

Child : Nobody don't like me.

Mother :No, say no body likes me.

Child : Nobody don't like me (eight repetitions of this sentence).

Mother : No, now listen carefully : say no body likes me.

Child : Oh ! No body don't likes me

- Language acquisition is more a matter of maturation than imitation.
- Deaf children who have not been exposed to a language may make up their own language. These new languages resemble each other in sentence structure, even when they are created in different cultures.
- The primary linguistic data which is the data children are exposed to while they are learning their native language will not be sufficient to cover all aspects of how sentences could be constructed,

and that humans therefore have some other form of aid in their process of acquiring their native language (poverty of stimulus).

- Language is creative.
- Creativity is not explicable if language is learnt just from the environment.



Noam Chomsky

Nativism



Eric Lenneberg

Limitations of Behaviourist view of language led in 1960's to the alternative “generative” account of language.

Main Arguments:

1. Children must be born with an innate capacity for language development.
2. Children can acquire language in a relatively short period of time.

3. A child does not have to be formally taught to acquire language and reinforcement has a very small role in acquisition
4. Children discover the system of language from unsystematic and small amount of data.

Evidence from Creoles

- Pidgin: simple language that arise in contact situations
- Creole: a fully complex language descended from a pidgin
- The grammar of a Creole is created by children as they learn it
- This is evidence that this grammar comes from some innate source

INNATE LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

Empiricists

Mind as a tabula rasa containing no knowledge prior to experience and placing no constraints on the forms of possible knowledge, except that they must be derived from experience by such mechanisms as the association of ideas or the habitual connection of stimulus and response (all knowledge comes from experience)

Rationalists

Human beings have knowledge that is not derived from experience but is prior to all experience and determines the form of the knowledge that can be gained from experience (language implanted innately and prior to experience)

LAD & Universal Grammar

- o LAD = Language Acquisition Device
- o LAD is a language 'blueprint' which develops into speech if there is no physiological defect.
- o Universal Grammar – Different languages have different surface structures but they all share the same deep structure.
- o His theories were supported by the fact that children go through the same stages at different times.

Deep and Surface structure

- **Deep structures** are the input to the **semantic component**, which describes **their meaning**.
- **Surface structures** are the input to the **phonological component**, which describes their **sound**.
- In short, **deep structure** determines **meaning**, **surface structure** determines **sound**.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK THE
LIMITATIONS OF NATIVISM ARE?**