

THEORIES & CONCEPTS OF

# Child Language Acquisition



# Behaviorism

*B.F. Skinner*

Behaviorist theory posits that language is learned through conditioning. In conditioning, certain behaviors are reinforced with positive consequences/feedback and other behaviors are either punished/provided negative feedback or ignored.

According to this framework, as a child learns a language, correct usage is rewarded and therefore repeated/learned and incorrect usage is not and so falls away.

**How/when to apply this theory:** Any time a caretaker praises correct speech or chides or corrects incorrect speech, it is an example of behaviorism.

# Nativist theory: language acquisition device (LAD)

*Noam Chomsky*

Nativist theory posits that children are born with the ability to use language.

Chomsky hypothesized that humans have an internal “language acquisition device” which allows them to process and use language. Much like a computer has the internal hardware needed to process programs, the human brain is designed to process language.

**How/when to apply this theory:** Any time a child creates new language constructions on their own, it is an example of nativist theory and LAD. Virtuous errors and creative word coinages are prime examples of how the brain can generate language even when it’s not being molded by outside forces such as conditioning.



# Language acquisition support system (LASS)

*Jerome Bruner*

Bruner theorised that regardless of one's innate ability, all children need to interact with proficient speakers in order for them to acquire language. Bruner called this community of proficient language users who help guide children in their language growth the language acquisition support system (LASS).

By tying the idea that humans are born ready for language with the need for outside support and stimulus, Bruner's theory serves as something of a bridge between behaviorism and nativist theory.

**How/when to apply this theory:** Any time a caretaker corrects, prompts, or models language, it is an example of the language acquisition support system.





# Cognitive development theory

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*Jean Piaget*

Cognitive development theory states that all children go through four stages of cognitive (brain) development and that a child's ability to use language is determined by the development of their brain (eg. a more developed brain is capable of higher level language).

**How/when to apply this theory:** Each stage of cognitive development is accompanied by a set of skills and traits. Wherever you find examples of these skills and traits in the exam transcript, you can link it to cognitive development theory.



# Cognitive development theory

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*Jean Piaget*

- **Sensorimotor stage:** (0-24 months) babies build an understanding of the world through their senses.
- **Preoperational stage:** (2-7 years) children think in definite terms though they tend to understand the world strictly in relation to themselves (egocentrism). Children rapidly develop their language skills.
- **Concrete operational stage:** (7-11 years) Children have increased logical thinking and can also use language for situations outside of their immediate experience.
- **Formal operational stage:** (12+ years) Youth become able to understand abstract concepts.

# Functional theory

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*Michael Halliday*

This theory posits that humans develop language to serve a certain set of functions. These functions allow people to live with one another and maintain their societies.

## Halliday identifies 7 functions of language:

- **Instrumental:** language used to fulfil a need
- **Regulatory:** language used to influence or manage the behaviors of others
- **Interactional:** language used to develop social relationships and get along
- **Personal:** language used to express personal opinions, feelings, and identity
- **representational:** language used to provide or request information
- **Heuristic:** language used to learn, explore, and discover
- **Imaginative:** language used to express imagination

# How/when to apply functional theory

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*Michael Halliday*

There are two levels of analysis that are available to you when applying Halliday's functions of language to a transcript of child speech.

**Surface level:** In this case, you simply point out how the child uses language in the ways that Halliday outlined (interactional, personal, etc.). Basically, you explain that Halliday's theory applies because there is evidence that children do, indeed, use language to achieve the functions Halliday laid out.

(See the next slide for the deeper level.)

# How/when to apply functional theory

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*Michael Halliday*

**Deeper level:** In this case, you demonstrate a strong understanding of functional theory by actually applying it as a tool for analysis (instead of simply identifying evidence of it in the transcript). To do this, match the child's use of the functions of language with their stage of development.

- Younger speakers (holophrastic and two-word stages) tend to rely heavily on the instrumental and regulatory functions (and to a lesser extent the personal and interactional).
- Children in the telegraphic and post-telegraphic stages will see an increase in the use of the heuristic, representational, and imaginative functions.
- As a child progresses in their language development, they will use all the function in more complex ways.

# Key Concepts

- caretaker language
  - turn taking
  - topic shift
  - adjacency pairs
  - elision
  - ellipsis
  - false start
  - repairing
  - hedging
  - face-threatening acts
- clashing
  - deixis
  - back-channelling
  - non-fluency features
  - rising/falling intonation
  - virtuous error
  - scaffolding
  - zone of proximal development
  - Initiation-response-feedback

**END**