

Kerstin Köck

Language Acquisition. Nativism vs. Constructivism

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1. Introduction

Language is an endless source of amazement. Language acquisition, namely the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use language, is a crucial matter to face for any theory of language. A strong approach about the acquisition of language should be able to provide an answer as to how children break into language and how language knowledge emerges and develops. The aim of this thesis is to introduce and discuss the most impacting approaches to language acquisition up to date and evaluate them against empirical data.

On the one hand, some scholars, among them the developmental psychologists Jean Piaget (1896-1980, cf. §3) and Michael Tomasello (born 1950, cf. §6), have been arguing that the acquisition of language is implemented via domain-neutral cognitive mechanisms and unspecific, general learning processes: such approaches reject both the idea of a language-specific ability and the hypothesis of any innate component in language acquisition. I will first discuss Jean Piaget's ideas and afterwards Michael Tomasello's recent elaboration of Piaget's constructivism.

On the other hand, the most renowned arguments in favour of language being an innate and specific cognitive module (an "instinct" in Pinker's terms, cf. Pinker 1995) come from Noam Chomsky (Chomsky 1965 and following work), an eminent scholar and founder of the modern science of linguistics. One of his most revolutionary ideas is the claim that children are innately be equipped with a species-specific mental module dedicated to the acquisition of language (§4). This theory of language and language acquisition is known as *nativism* and stands in contrast with Piaget's and Tomasello's *constructivist* view outlined above.

In the following sections I will be introducing the several, intriguing questions about the emergence and development of language in infants and the complexity and modularity of human languages (§2).

In Chapter 3, I will outline Piaget's model of language acquisition, labelled *epigenetic constructivism*, as well as his arguments. I will then move on to review some potential – and, in my view, very solid – counterarguments to the Piagetian approach.

In Chapter 4, I will be presenting the Chomskyan approach and some of the potential difficulties which have been proposed by its opponents. I will try and evaluate such counterarguments based, again, on empirical evidence. Chapter 5 is devoted to the actual debate on language which Piaget and Chomsky undertook in the seventies.