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## HOW CHILDREN LEARN THEIR FIRST LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

This paper explores how children acquire their first language, drawing upon linguistic, psychological, and neurological research. The study reviews key stages of acquisition, major theoretical perspectives, and the role of environmental and social interaction. Evidence suggests that innate mechanisms, statistical learning, and social engagement collectively shape how children develop native-language competence.

**Keywords:** language acquisition, child development, first language, cognitive linguistics.

### Introduction

The acquisition of a first language (L1) by children is a remarkable and nearly universal process. Virtually all typically developing children, when exposed to ambient language input, become competent speakers of their community's language within a few years of birth (Kuhl, 2015). This paper reviews the mechanisms and stages in first-language acquisition, explores major theoretical accounts, and considers the influence of environment, social interaction, and neurodevelopment.

**Stages of First Language Acquisition.** Early in life, infants are sensitive to the full range of human speech sounds. During the first year, they gradually tune into the phonological patterns of their native language (Kuhl, 2015). Around seven months, infants begin segmenting words from continuous speech using statistical learning (Saffran et al., 1996). Once segmentation begins, children map words onto meanings through context and inference (Lany & Saffran, 2010).

Grammar development follows as children begin combining words and inferring syntactic rules. Theories such as semantic and syntactic bootstrapping suggest children use meaning and sentence structure to infer grammatical categories (Pinker,



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1984). These mechanisms show that children are not passive recipients but active learners who test and refine linguistic hypotheses.

**The Role of Social Interaction and Environment.** Language learning occurs in social contexts. Caregivers use child-directed speech—simplified syntax, exaggerated intonation, and repetition—to facilitate comprehension (Snow, 1995). Interactive experiences such as naming, story-telling, and play help children understand communicative intent (Bruner, 1983). Socio-cultural theorists argue that language is acquired through joint attention, scaffolding, and participation in cultural routines (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Theoretical Perspectives.** Theories of first-language acquisition vary between nativist, behaviorist, and interactionist views. Chomsky (1965) proposed that humans possess a universal grammar enabling rapid acquisition. In contrast, usage-based and statistical learning theories emphasize pattern detection and input frequency (Tomasello, 2003). The interactionist view integrates both perspectives, proposing that biological predispositions and social experience co-develop.

**Neurodevelopment and Sensitive Periods.** Neuroscientific research supports the existence of sensitive periods in phonological and grammatical acquisition (Lenneberg, 1967). During early childhood, brain plasticity facilitates rapid learning; after puberty, language acquisition becomes less efficient. Studies show that infants' brains specialize for native language sounds by nine months (Kuhl, 2015), highlighting the importance of early exposure.

**Factors Influencing First Language Learning.** Several factors influence acquisition rate and proficiency, including:

1. Quantity and quality of input (Hart & Risley, 1995).
2. Parental responsiveness and feedback (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001).
3. Socioeconomic context and literacy environment.
4. Bilingual or multilingual exposure, which may affect pacing but enhances cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2001).



**Implications and Applications.** Understanding how children acquire their first language informs education and speech therapy. Early intervention for delayed language development should emphasize interactive and meaningful communication rather than rote instruction. Educators can support language growth through rich vocabulary input, storytelling, and active dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

Children's acquisition of their first language is a multifaceted process combining innate abilities, environmental input, and social interaction. No single mechanism explains it fully; rather, these elements interact dynamically. Understanding these processes can help parents, educators, and researchers create optimal conditions for children's linguistic and cognitive development.

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