

Mustansiriyah University

College of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

3<sup>rd</sup> Year Linguistics

Textbook: Linguistics (Aichison, 2010)

Lecture Title: Language and Mind

- The aim of this lecture is to investigate the relation between language and mind from a psycholinguistic perspective, with a focus on first language acquisition.
- Psycholinguistics is often defined as the study of language and the mind. It explores what goes on in the human mind as an individual acquires, comprehends, produces and stores language.
- **Psycholinguistics** covers an enormous range of topics, and no two psycholinguists agree on exactly the ground which it covers. One reason for this disagreement is that psycholinguistics overlaps with a somewhat wider study, sometimes called the **psychology of communication**, which looks at language alongside other human methods of communication, such as the use of gesture and facial expressions
- Since mind cannot be directly observed, so psycholinguists have to obtain their evidence from two main sources: observation of spontaneous utterances, on the one hand, and psycholinguistic experiments, on the other.
- From a methodological perspective, major topics in psycholinguistics should be tackled both by observing spontaneous speech and by devising experiments. When the results coincide, this is an indicator that progress is being made.
- The question of innateness represents one of the main questions related to language acquisition, as psycholinguists attempt to know whether humans have a genetic disposition to learn and use language or they simply learn language through socialization.
- However, language seems to be **maturationally controlled behavior**, which means that language develops naturally at a particular point in an individual's life. An understanding of maturationally controlled behavior has abolished the old nature-nurture controversy.
- Realizing that language is maturationally controlled means that most psycholinguists now agree that humans are innately programmed to speak, but they cannot agree on the extent to which language ability is separate from other cognitive abilities. This disagreement is called content-process controversy.
- In psycholinguistics, the content-process controversy is a disagreement over whether children's minds naturally contain linguistic information or they work out how to process linguistic data.

- There is extraordinary similarity in the speech development of English-speaking children for instance. Children who are not related to each other in any way go through similar stages in their development, and also make similar mistakes.
- Those psycholinguists who support the content approach consider this uniformity of speech development as an evidence for the opinion that children innately contain a blueprint for language, or even a universal framework imprinted in their brains. However, those who support the process approach, argue that children could not possibly contain specific language universals, but they make use of other cognitive abilities, for instance problem-solving ability, to process linguistic data. Yet, another group of psycholinguists point to the social nature of language, and the role of child carers tend to talk about the same sort of things because motherese or caregiver language has fairly similar characteristics almost everywhere.
- The proponents of the latter view claim there is no need to search for complex innate mechanisms: social interaction with caring caregivers is sufficient to cause language to develop. Yet, the fact that parents make it easier for children to learn language does not explain why they are so quick to acquire it.
- The child learning processes is a complex process because it does not simply involve imitation. Children seem to be aware that language is rule-governed, and they are engaged in an active search for the regularities which underlie the language to which they are exposed. Fluctuation occurs as children acquire a rule; every rule takes time to become firmly established.