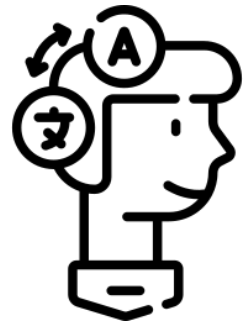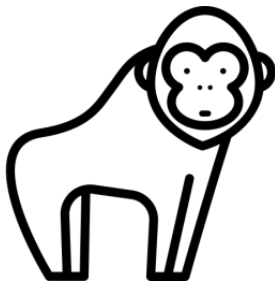# Theories of Language Emergence

Humans and animals communicate. What makes us different?
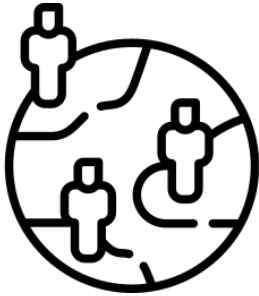
The power of LANGUAGE allows humans to dominate over other species on earth.

Language is the basis of all learning in humans.

Think about how complex a single language can be. There are more than a million words in the English language alone.

How many different languages are there in the world?

Language is the vehicle used to send and receive information.

Imagine if we had no words to represent or convey our thoughts?

What is Language?

A system of **intentional** communication and **self-expression** through sounds, signs (gestures) and symbols (pictures) that are understandable to others. (humans vs. animals)

Each language, each system, has its own **set of rules** to follow and learn. English is taught in schools for twelve or more years.

We need to share the **same** language to best understand each other. Language allows us to work cooperatively with others.

- How do we learn language, starting from the day we were born?
- Is language already present in our brains before we are born?
- Is language being developed while in the womb? Or is it only acquired after birth when the baby interacts with others?

Scientists thought about how language is developed (how it emerges) and developed several theories.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a **theory** *is a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena.*

In simpler words, a **theory** is an idea, backed by research, that attempts to explain something or how things work. Ex: The Big Bang Theory, JFK assassination, the existence of aliens

A **theory** is possibly true but not yet proven to be. It could still be considered a guess but one that is based more on facts than a hypothesis would be.

Why would the explanation of how language emerges only exist in theory? (not proven)

What research would have to be done in order to study language? How can we access the brain?

Experimentation on the human brain is not allowed as it may have been in the past (lobotomies). Research today is based on less intrusive measures, such as observations, interviews, and surveys

Language Emergence Theorists
(people who developed a theory)

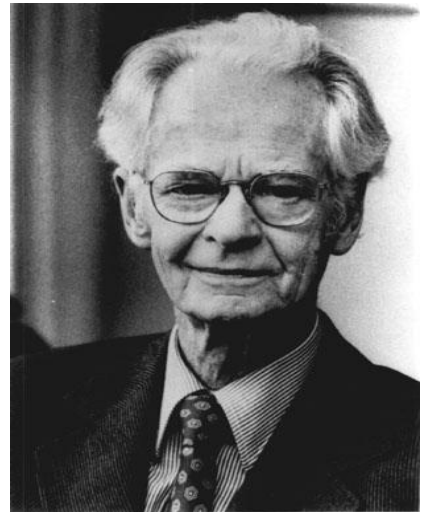These four famous theorists studied how language emerges (begins to develop) once a child is born.

1) Skinner
2) Chomsky
3) Vygotsky
4) Gesell

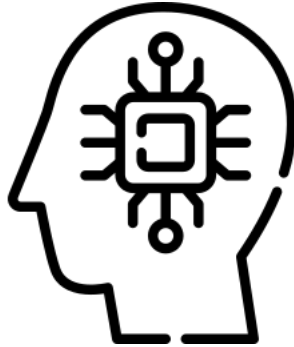# B.F. Skinner

Behaviorist OR
Stimulus-Response
Theory

B.F. Skinner

- A child learns language (such as the quality, quantity, attitude of it) as a result of the reactions of the people in his environment.
- He will further develop his language skills based on the feedback or "responses" he gets from others when he talks.
- *Johnny learns to talk because he gets a reward for doing it (food, toys, attention, a person's response back to him).*
- *He learns from the reactions people give him in his environment.*

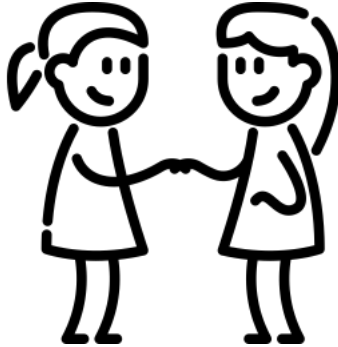# N. Chomsky

Predetermined OR Human Capacity Theory

N. Chomsky

- Every child has an individual Language Acquisition Device (LAD) in the brain which enables him to master any language that he has been exposed to since birth.
- The LAD has the language rules to all languages. The child learns whatever language that he is exposed to by his mother ("mother tongue" - first person to speak to the newborn). Additional languages can also be used.
- *Johnny learns to talk because he was born with the ability to do so (all humans have an LAD).*
- *He learns a language by being exposed to it at birth (mother tongue).*

L.Vygotsky

Interactional OR
Cognitive-Transactional
Theory

Vygotsky

- Children are shaped by "transactions" with people in their environment. (exchange of information)

- Social and emotional drives (the need for love and care, acceptance from peers) prompts a child to learn language.

- *Johnny learns to talk because he is curious and his interactions with others motivates him to do so.*

- *He learns language so that he can relate to others (socialize).*
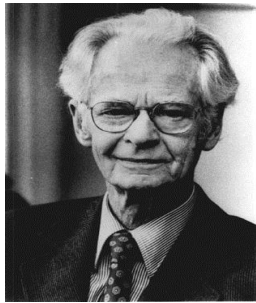
A. Gesell

Inheritance OR
Maturational
Theory

A. Gesell

- Children are primarily a product of genetic inheritance and environmental influences are secondary. They inherit their abilities to learn language.
- A child will move from one developmental stage to another and needs to be ready or "mature" in order to graduate to a higher level. (from baby talk to sentences)
- *Johnny learns to talk because it is in his genes. He inherited his language abilities from his parents.*
- *He would talk early because his parents had talked early (inherited).*

Which Theorist do you agree with most?

Skinner

Chomsky

Vygotsky

Gesell

Tell me more about yourself...

- *Which theorist is still alive and has his own Twitter account?*
- *Which theorist is from Russia and died at the young age of 37?*
- *Which theorist primarily used a movie camera to film his studies of children? He was known to use one-way mirrors (like the ones seen in crime shows) to observe their behaviors.*
- *Which theorist thought playing was important in development?*
- *Which theorist experimented by placing a rat in a box and trained it to touch different levers (buttons) for food or water? This theorist also trained pigeons to play ping pong!*
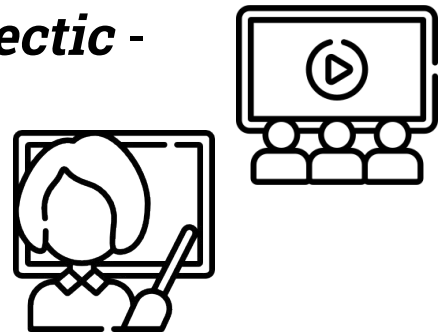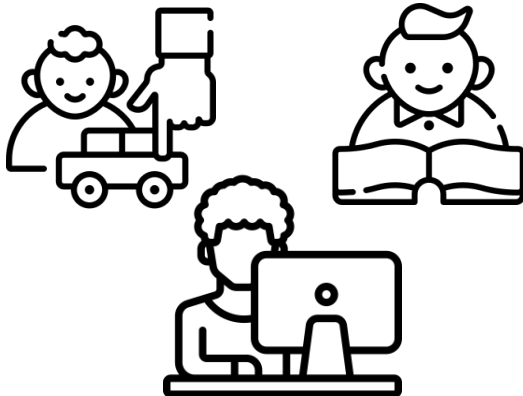- *Which theorist enrolled in college at the age of 16?*

- There is not ONE theory that solely explains language emergence. The theories may overlap. How language emerges is STILL a mystery.

  Eclectic: selecting what appears to be the best in various doctrines, methods, or styles.

- Take the *eclectic* approach to explain language emergence - the best part of each theory can help you better understand how language begins in young children.

As a teacher, it helps to be *eclectic* - use different techniques and approaches when you teach.

Remember, students will also be *eclectic* - they learn in different ways and styles.

<u>Reference</u>

Machado, J. (2006). *Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts*.
New York: Delmar Publishers.

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