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عنوان المحاضرة: Acquisition vs. Learning in First Language

Development

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## Acquisition vs. Learning in First Language Development in Yule's *The Study of Language*

### 1. Introduction:

How Do Children Acquire Language? One of the most fascinating areas in linguistics is how children acquire their first language. By the age of five, most children can speak and understand their native language fluently—despite not being formally taught. This natural process raises an important distinction: acquisition vs. learning. George Yule (in *The Study of Language*) emphasizes that understanding this distinction is key to

comprehending how humans develop linguistic ability and why it differs from learning other skills, such as mathematics or writing.

## **2. What Is First Language Acquisition?**

Language acquisition refers to the subconscious, natural development of language through regular exposure and interaction, especially in early childhood. It typically occurs without formal instruction and is tied to everyday communication and meaningful input. Characteristics of Language Acquisition: Occurs naturally, usually before the age of 6 Requires exposure to language in a meaningful context (family, caregivers, etc.) Does not require explicit grammar instruction Involves unconscious internalization of rules Follows a universal sequence of development Yule explains that children do not simply “copy” adult speech. Instead, they construct rules and test hypotheses based on the input they receive. For example, children often say "goed" instead of "went"—a sign that they are applying internal grammar rules rather than memorizing.

## **3. What Is Language Learning?**

In contrast, language learning refers to the conscious study of language forms, often in classroom settings. It is the typical way adults learn a second or foreign language and involves memorizing vocabulary, grammar rules, and practicing drills. Characteristics of Language Learning: Conscious and intentional Often takes place in formal environments (e.g., schools) Involves explicit instruction in grammar and usage Requires effort and attention Often focuses on accuracy and correction Yule notes that while children acquire their first language naturally, second language learners—especially adults—often learn the

language, which makes the process slower, less intuitive, and more prone to errors or fossilization.

#### **4. Key Differences: Acquisition vs. Learning**

Aspect	Acquisition	Learning
Process	Natural and subconscious	Formal and conscious
Typical Learners	Children acquiring their first language	Older learners (second language)
Focus	Meaning and communication	Structure and rules
Environment	Immersion in language use	Classroom instruction
Error Correction	Minimal correction; self-correction over time	Frequent correction and feedback
Goal	Fluency and natural use	Accuracy and rule mastery

Yule stresses that acquisition leads to deeper, more intuitive language competence, while learning is more about surface-level performance and often does not lead to native-like fluency.

#### **5. The Critical Period Hypothesis**

Yule also references the idea of a critical period in language acquisition: the belief that there is a biologically determined window in

childhood (often said to end around puberty) during which the human brain is most capable of acquiring language naturally. Support for this hypothesis includes: Cases of feral or isolated children (e.g., Genie) who missed this window and struggled to acquire full linguistic ability The observation that younger learners typically achieve more native-like pronunciation and grammar in second languages than adults

The critical period supports the notion that acquisition is biologically programmed, while learning relies more on cognitive strategies that develop with age.

## **6. Implications for Education and Teaching**

Understanding the acquisition-learning distinction has major implications for language teaching: Early exposure to language (e.g., bilingual homes, immersion programs) can enhance acquisition. Communicative teaching methods, which mimic natural acquisition, tend to be more effective than traditional grammar-based methods. Teachers should focus on meaningful interaction rather than just accuracy, especially for younger learners.

Yule suggests that promoting environments where learners can use language, not just study it, helps bridge the gap between learning and acquisition.