# A Theoretical Review of Language and Moral Development According to Chomsky and Kohlberg

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## Abstract

**Introduction to The Problem:** This article theoretically explores two main pillars of human developmental psychology: language and moral development. It is based on the need for a comprehensive review that separately outlines Noam Chomsky's transformational generative theory of language development and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development theory. **Purpose:** This study provides an in-depth and separate intellectual profile, postulates and theoretical structure, as well as the dynamics of the language and moral development processes of each theory. **Design/methods/approach:** Through a literature study method with a psychological approach, this study analyzes and synthesizes relevant literature to build a clear understanding of the basic assumptions and implications of both theories. The researcher analyzed various primary and secondary sources from various academic databases. The data collected were analyzed using content analysis techniques. **Findings:** The results of the study indicate that, although Chomsky and Kohlberg operate in different domains with unique theoretical assumptions, both have made fundamental contributions to shaping our understanding of how individuals develop their language and moral capacities separately. **Originality/value:** The novelty of this article is that it provides a structured theoretical review focused on each theory independently, without comparison or synthesis, thereby establishing a strong foundation of understanding before more complex interconnection studies.

**Keywords:** Language development; Moral development; Noam Chomsky; Lawrence Kohlberg; Developmental psychology.

## Introduction

Amidst the rapid tides of societal change, the study of human development has become a critical domain within psychology. This discourse offers a valuable lens for understanding how individuals grow and adapt (Wahyudi, 2024). Development is a continuous and gradual process, marked by the emergence of abilities that were previously absent or undeveloped within an individual at the appropriate stages. The skills that arise as a result of human development serve as essential tools for individuals to adjust and respond to their surrounding environment (Khotima et al., 2024).

The term development refers to changes in the physical and psychological characteristics of human life that are interconnected and move toward a better or more complete state (Naibaho et al., 2024). According to Santrock, human development is a continuous and complex process influenced by various factors, including genetics, environment, and individual experience (Santrock, 2002). Meanwhile, Hurlock suggests that development encompasses the various aspirations of society. In other words, the environment expects individuals to possess certain skills or knowledge and to behave in ways that align with societal norms across all ages (Hurlock, 1980).

Among the many types of development, language and moral development stand out as fundamental pillars in shaping a person's cognitive, social, and ethical abilities. Language plays a vital role in human life as a means of daily communication (Arnianti, 2019). Without language, effective communication is impossible, and consequently, social interaction cannot take place (Dewi & Randi, 2024). Broadly, language development refers to the complex process through which individuals learn to understand and use verbal communication.

Morality, on the other hand, is a set of principles related to behaviors that are expected to be followed. It serves as a system of norms and behavioral guidelines that govern how individuals act in relation to society and other social groups. Morality refers to standards of right and wrong defined by members of a social community, based on their sociocultural and cultural context. Moral development involves changes in reasoning, emotion, and behavior regarding standards of right and wrong. It encompasses an intrapersonal dimension—governing personal conduct in the absence of social interaction—and an interpersonal dimension, which regulates social engagement and conflict resolution (Santrock, 2000). Moral development is essential as a component of personality that enables individuals to interact with others harmoniously and with balance (Ibda, 2023).

In this context, Noam Chomsky's theory of language development and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development have become foundational frameworks in our understanding, even though each addresses a different domain. Chomsky's contributions to language development sparked discussions on the role of nature and nurture, particularly through his ideas of Universal Grammar (UG) and the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). His proposition of an innate basis for language learning challenged the prevailing empirical views. Meanwhile, Kohlberg proposed a universal and hierarchical model of moral development based on cognitive reasoning.

Although both theories are now widely accepted, they have also faced significant controversy and critique. Chomsky's theory stands in direct contrast to B.F. Skinner's behaviorist model, which argued that language is entirely learned through operant conditioning. Similarly, Kohlberg's theory has been criticized by Carol Gilligan, who argued that it contains gender bias due to its male-

centered sample and fails to account for the ethics of care, which is more prevalent among women (Dardjowidjojo, 2005).

Several previous studies have also used Chomsky and Kohlberg's theories as their main analytical frameworks. One such study, titled "Noam Chomsky's Transformational Generative Theory: An Analysis of the Prophet's Hadith on Intention" by Fahri Muhaimin Fabrori, applies Chomsky's theory to identify and explain linguistic differences in two hadiths. The analysis examines how variations in surface structure affect the meaning of the hadith (Fabrori, 2023).

Another study, "Moral Knowledge as a Basis for Character Formation: An Analysis of Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and a Study of Surah Luqman Verses 12–14" by Komarudin Sholeh, emphasizes the importance of moral knowledge in shaping individuals with strong moral character. It also highlights the crucial role of parents and the environment in instilling moral values in younger generations (Sholeh, 2024).

Unlike the previous studies, which focus more on analyzing Chomsky and Kohlberg's theories in relation to religious texts, this study presents a more focused exploration of the stages or processes of human language and moral development based on both theorists. Given the significance and complexity of these theoretical frameworks, the study is titled "A Theoretical Perspective of Chomsky and Kohlberg: Linguistics and Morality in Human Development." This research does not aim to compare or integrate the two theories but rather to elaborate on the core assumptions, key concepts, and developmental dynamics of language and morality as conceptualized by each scholar.

## Methods

This study employs a library research approach, using psychology as its primary analytical lens. Library research refers to a method of data collection carried out by reviewing and understanding theories from various literature sources related to the research topic (Adlini et al., 2022). According to Nakano and Munis, as cited in Irawan (2022), library research serves as a method to uncover theories that support the arguments developed within a study. Additionally, library research enables researchers to identify research gaps and formulate more specific research questions.

Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources, including books, scientific journal articles, and educational policy documents sourced from academic databases such as Google Scholar, Garuda, Sinta, and Scopus, using relevant keywords. The researcher collected articles published within the last five years (2020–2025), including both nationally and internationally indexed materials as well as those not yet indexed. Books and e-books without publication date limitations were also included. The data were analyzed using content analysis

techniques, which involved summarizing information, categorizing data, paraphrasing key points, and drawing conclusions (Adlini et al., 2022). The aim was to identify key themes, differences in perspective, and the interrelation of concepts.

## Result

**1. Profil Chomsky dan Kohlberg**

a. Profile of Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky is a linguistics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), widely recognized as the Father of Modern Linguistics. He is renowned for his revolutionary theory of generative grammar, which posits that the ability to acquire language is innate and driven by a mental mechanism known as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This theory also introduces the idea of universal linguistic competence a set of fundamental principles shared across all human languages. Chomsky's theory has significantly influenced not only the field of linguistics but also cognitive psychology and computer science (Piter, 2022).

Chomsky's intellectual contributions are deeply connected to his personal background. Born Avram Noam Chomsky on December 7, 1928, in Philadelphia, United States, he came from a Jewish family. His father, Dr. William Zev Chomsky, was a prominent Hebrew grammar scholar, and his mother, Elsie Simonofsky, was a politically left-leaning activist. In 1949, he married Carol Doris Schatz. Chomsky's early intellectual development was shaped by his family environment. He was introduced to thinkers such as Freud, Marx, Stalin, and Lenin by his uncle. Raised to be strong-minded, independent, and anti-establishment, Chomsky's outlook was deeply influenced by this early exposure (Delfia, 2022).

In addition to his linguistic work, Chomsky is known as a critical intellectual voice, particularly against U.S. foreign policy. He has written over thirty political books, challenging conventional wisdom and advocating for social justice. He distinguishes between two intellectual roles: technocratic and morally driven. For Chomsky, a true intellectual is someone who seeks to uplift humanity through freedom, intelligence, and creativity—not only academics but also practitioners and religious leaders who advance human dignity (Piter, 2022).

Chomsky argues that language is a core component of human cognition that sets us apart from animals. He emphasizes that language is an internal system developed from early childhood, enabling humans to understand and generate new sentences, rather than simply memorize words (Piter, 2022).

b. Profile of Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg was born in Bronxville, New York, United States, in 1927, and passed away in Winthrop, Massachusetts, in 1987. He is best known for his theory of moral development. Kohlberg conducted experimental research on individual morality and classified the stages of moral development. His work has had a significant impact on educational practice. Moral development occurs in stages, with each stage representing a more advanced level than the previous one. The moral development of children is also supported through moral education in schools. For this reason, Kohlberg emphasized that both cognitive and moral development are essential goals of education.

Lawrence Kohlberg was a professor who taught at the University of Chicago and Harvard University, widely recognized for his contributions in education, moral reasoning, and moral development. He was a proponent and further developer of the cognitive development theory initially introduced by Jean Piaget. His works were later expanded and refined by various scholars, including Carol Gilligan, who was both a colleague and a critic of his theory. Kohlberg was born into a well-off family and attended Phillips Academy, a prestigious private high school. During World War II, after completing his secondary education, he served as an engineer aboard a ship. During this time, he and his fellow crew members took the initiative to help Jewish refugees escape from Europe to Palestine by smuggling them inside banana cargo shipments successfully deceiving British government inspectors enforcing a blockade in the region.

After his military service, Kohlberg enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1948. He scored exceptionally high on the entrance exams and completed his bachelor's degree in psychology in just one year. He continued his graduate studies at the same university, developing a strong interest in children's moral reasoning and the early works of Jean Piaget and other theorists. In 1958, he completed his doctoral dissertation, which laid the foundation for what is now known as Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

In 1962, Kohlberg began teaching at the University of Chicago as part of the Committee on Human Development, deepening his involvement in the academic world. By 1968, at the age of 40, married with two children, he became a professor of education and social psychology at Harvard University. During his time at Harvard, he met Carol Gilligan, who later became both a colleague and a notable critic of his moral development theory.

In 1969, during a visit to Israel, Kohlberg observed life in a kibbutz and noted that the moral development of young people there appeared significantly more advanced

compared to those outside such communities. This experience prompted him to reconsider his research and led him to establish a new educational initiative called the Cluster School, located within Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School. The Cluster School was run as a just community, where students built trust-based relationships and participated democratically in decision-making processes. This model later expanded to other schools—and even to a prison—as part of Kohlberg's broader effort to promote "just communities" (Kohlberg, 1958).

In 1971, while conducting cross-cultural research in Belize, Kohlberg contracted a tropical disease. The illness led to prolonged physical suffering and depression that lasted for the next 16 years. On January 19, 1987, while on leave from Massachusetts Hospital, he drove to the coast and ended his life by walking into the Atlantic Ocean. He died at the age of 59.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks of Chomsky and Kohlberg

### a. Noam Chomsky's Generative-Transformational Linguistic Theory

Noam Chomsky's generative-transformational linguistic theory centers on the understanding that language structure is innate. Chomsky proposed that there are two key components in this theory: competence and performance. Competence refers to the implicit knowledge of language that a speaker possesses, while performance refers to the actual use of language in communication (Mivtakh, 2023). These two are distinct. A child's language performance develops as their inherent competence is nurtured (Latipah, 2017).

According to this theory, language can be analyzed through two structural levels: deep structure and surface structure. Deep structure holds the underlying meaning, whereas surface structure reflects the actual spoken or written expression. The concept of transformation explains how sentences are formed by converting deep structures into surface forms through various mechanisms such as addition, deletion, and rearrangement allowing for the production of diverse and complex sentences (Ummah et al., 2025).

Chomsky argued that humans are biologically equipped neurologically and cognitively to acquire language at a particular time and in specific ways. He proposed the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a mental module in the human brain that enables children to develop language as long as they are exposed to communication (Latipah, 2017a). According to Chomsky, every child is born with an LAD, which naturally allows them to grasp their first language (L1 or mother tongue) (Hidayat, 2023).

Simply put, Chomsky claimed that just as birds are born to fly, humans are born to speak. Children are equipped with a universal grammar from birth, meaning their brains

are naturally sensitive to the basic structures common to all languages. These universal features include elements such as subject, object, noun, verb, and negative construction. Many linguists agree that children across cultures acquire language in strikingly similar ways, suggesting that language has a biological foundation (Latipah, 2017). According to Chomsky, every child is born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) naturally embedded in the brain. This innate mechanism enables children to rapidly acquire and understand their first language (L1, or mother tongue) (Hidayat, 2023).

Put simply, Chomsky argued that just as birds are born to fly, humans are born to speak. This means that children are equipped from birth with a universal grammar—an innate sensitivity in the brain to the basic features shared by all human languages. These universal features include elements such as subjects, objects, nouns, verbs, and negative sentences. Many linguists agree that children around the world acquire language in remarkably similar ways, indicating that language has a biological foundation (Latipah, 2017).

Chomsky's postulates about language are supported by strong evidence identified by psycholinguists researchers who study the psychology of language. These pieces of evidence can be outlined as follows:

1) Children across different countries and cultures go through similar stages of language development. For example, they construct negative sentences by adding the word "no" at the beginning or end of a sentence. At later stages, they tend to use double negatives, such as "he doesn't want no milk" or "nobody don't like me" (Latipah, 2017).

2) The word order used by children is often different from that used by adults, as they frequently shorten their parents' sentences. For instance, "Let's go to the market" might become simply "Go market." Children also make grammatical errors that adults would not, such as saying "Daddy taked me" instead of "Daddy took me" (Latipah, 2017).

3) Parents are generally inconsistent in correcting their children's grammatical mistakes. Nevertheless, children still manage to learn how to speak and communicate accurately.

4) Children who are not regularly exposed to adult language will often develop their own means of communication. For example, deaf children who have never heard formal language often invent their own sign systems (Safitri et al., 2024).

5) Infants as young as seven months old demonstrate an ability to infer basic grammatical patterns. If exposed to an A-B-A pattern (e.g., "ga ti ga"), they will later prefer a new A-B-B pattern (e.g., "wo fe fe"), and vice versa. This suggests that infants are able to recognize and differentiate linguistic structures (Latipah, 2017).

b. Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

One form of developmental change in children is moral development. This is reflected in behavior, manners, good character, and age-appropriate moral conduct (Afnita & Latipah, 2021). One of the key figures in the study of moral development is Lawrence Kohlberg. His interest was sparked by Piaget's The Moral Judgment of the Child, which led him to explore how children experience moral growth (Masganti, 2010).

Kohlberg emphasized that the key factor driving moral behavior is moral reasoning. Therefore, moral reasoning can be used to identify whether a behavior is truly moral. This implies that accurate moral assessment involves examining the reasoning behind moral judgments, rather than merely observing visible moral behavior (Budiningsih, 2008). In other words, Kohlberg's theory does not focus solely on what a person does, but rather on how a person arrives at the decision of what is right or wrong (Rettob & Ali, 2024).

A central principle of Kohlberg's theory is the universality of moral development. Although specific moral values may vary across cultures, Kohlberg believed that the stages of moral thinking are universal. He also stressed that these stages are hierarchical and sequential, meaning that individuals cannot skip stages—they must progress through them in order. His theory centers on moral reasoning as the foundation of morality. For Kohlberg, the reasoning behind a moral choice is more important than the choice itself.

To test and refine his theory, Kohlberg developed an innovative research method using hypothetical moral dilemmas. Participants were presented with stories involving moral conflicts, such as the well-known Heinz dilemma. In this story, a woman is dying of cancer. Her husband, Heinz, begs a pharmacist who has developed a potentially life-saving drug to let him buy it. However, the pharmacist refuses because Heinz cannot afford the high price. Desperate, Heinz breaks into the pharmacy and steals the drug (Rettob & Ali, 2024).

Based on this story, Kohlberg posed open-ended questions to participants, such as: Should Heinz have done that? Why or why not? The study involved 75 boys aged 10, 13, and 16, who were interviewed periodically over more than 30 years. The goal was not to assess whether the children answered "yes" or "no" to the act of stealing, but to analyze the reasoning behind their answers. From this analysis, Kohlberg categorized their responses into three levels and six stages of moral development (Asrori, 2009).

Based on the findings of Kohlberg's research, the following conclusions were drawn:
1) Moral judgment and behavior are fundamentally rational, not merely matters of emotion or values. Moral decisions involve active cognitive interpretation of dilemmas, taking

into account demands, rights, obligations, as well as notions of goodness and justice from multiple perspectives. All of these are cognitive processes.

2) There are distinct formal stages of moral reasoning, which adolescents typically use to justify their moral actions.

3) Both Piaget and Kohlberg agree that by around the age of 16, individuals reach the highest stage of moral development. Piaget noted that formal operational thinking emerges during adolescence, while Kohlberg observed a parallel in which adolescents are able to apply universal principles of justice in their moral reasoning at the highest stage of moral development (Rettob & Ali, 2024).

3. **Dynamics of Language and Moral Development in Humans**
   a. Chomsky's Language Development Process
      Across the globe, humans appear to follow similar stages and patterns in acquiring language. Language acquisition is an internal journey that occurs in children's minds as they develop their first language or mother tongue. While Chomsky did not explicitly outline developmental stages, psycholinguists have proposed stages based on the internal processes by which the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) "processes" linguistic input from the environment and begins constructing a grammar system. These stages are described as follows (Latipah, 2017):

   1) Cooing (Primarily Vowel Sounds)

      Babies naturally produce sounds on their own. One obvious example is crying, which, although possibly unintentional, functions as an early form of communication. From a language development perspective, cooing is considered an early attempt to explore vocal sound production. Interestingly, babies around the world including those with hearing impairments exhibit similar cooing patterns, showing little variation across languages or cultures.

   2) Babbling (Combining Consonants and Vowels)

      According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), babbling refers to the vocalization stage in infants as a form of practice for speech. It may also mean uttering indistinct or unclear words. During this stage, deaf babies may cease producing vocal sounds, but hearing infants across language groups continue to babble in remarkably similar ways.

   3) One-Word Utterances

      Between 10 and 13 months of age, infants begin producing their first words. At this stage, they appear to passively receive external cues from their caregivers and respond

in various ways for example, by smiling at friendly people. These one-word expressions, known as holophrases, are used to communicate requests, emotions, or needs. These words are typically nouns referring to familiar or desired objects (e.g., car, book, ball, mama, juice).

4) Two-Word Utterances and Telegraphic Speech

By around 24 months, toddlers begin combining two words. This stage has three sub-stages: the one-word sentence (e.g., "mommy" could mean many things), the two-word sentence (e.g., "sister fall"), and multi-word utterances (e.g., "I eat rice"). Though not yet grammatically complete, these expressions are meaningful and demonstrate cognitive development in language use.

5) Basic Adult Sentence Structure

Vocabulary grows rapidly during early childhood. By age three, a child's vocabulary expands from around 300 words to over 1,000. Surprisingly, by age four, children begin to construct sentences that resemble the patterns and foundations of adult language. Most children are capable of understanding and producing relatively complex sentence structures by the age of five. By the time they reach ten, their language use is largely similar to that of adults.

b. Kohlberg's Moral Development Process
1) Level One: Pre-Conventional

This is the earliest stage of moral development. At this phase, children lack a strong understanding of moral values. The pre-conventional level consists of two stages. The first stage is characterized by obedience and punishment orientation children act to avoid punishment. The second stage is characterized by a relativist-hedonistic orientation, where actions are based on self-interest and the pursuit of rewards (Latipah, 2017).

2) Level Two: Conventional

At this level, children begin to adopt certain standards internally; however, these standards are still derived from external sources, such as parents or social norms. The conventional level also includes two stages. The first stage involves the "good boy/good girl" orientation, where children aim to be seen as good by others. The second stage focuses on maintaining social order and respecting authority moral behavior is seen as fulfilling social rules or obligations (Latipah, 2017).

3) Level Three: Post-Conventional

At this stage, morality becomes fully internalized. Individuals are capable of evaluating multiple moral perspectives and eventually establishing their own moral

principles. This level also consists of two stages. The first is oriented toward social contract and legal rights—morality is viewed as a mutual agreement with society. The second stage involves universal ethical principles, where morality is guided by deeply held ethical values that go beyond personal or societal norms (Latipah, 2017).

## Conclusion

Chomsky's generative-transformational theory fundamentally emphasizes the innate aspects of language acquisition through the concepts of Universal Grammar and the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), challenging behaviorist assumptions and highlighting children's inherent capacity to acquire language. In parallel, Kohlberg's theory of moral development—rooted in Piaget's cognitive constructivism—proposes that moral reasoning progresses through a universal and hierarchical sequence of stages, with an emphasis on the structure of reasoning behind moral decisions rather than their content. Although Chomsky and Kohlberg operate in distinct domains, both offer essential insights into the complexity of human development. By presenting these two theories independently, this article provides a clear and structured understanding of each framework while affirming the enduring relevance of their theoretical contributions in the field of developmental psychology.

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