

# Language acquisition

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Module 5  
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# Some things children say

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CHILD: Want other one spoon, Daddy.

FATHER: You mean, you want the other spoon.

CHILD: Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.

FATHER: Can you say "the other spoon"?

CHILD: Other ... one ... spoon.

FATHER: Say "other."

CHILD: Other.

FATHER: "Spoon."

CHILD: Spoon.

FATHER: "Other spoon."

CHILD: Other ... spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

Braine (1971)



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- Before the age of five, children know most of the grammar of their language(s). This is before they can add two numbers.
  - They do not learn a language by memorizing the sentences of the language. Instead they acquire a set a grammatical rules.
  - Nobody tells them which sentences are grammatical and which are not. Adults do not know it themselves.



# Basic requirements for language acquisition

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- physically capable
- Interaction with other language-users

If you do not get a chance to interact with users of a language:

- 1) Genie – fourteen year old with minimal human contact from the age of eighteen months.
- 2) Victor – grew up in the forests, again no human contact
- 3) Chelsea – deaf but wrongly diagnosed as retarded

They were unable to acquire grammar even after years of exposure, even though they learnt many words.



# The critical period hypothesis

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- The critical period hypothesis assumes that language is biologically determined and that the ability to learn a native language develops within a fixed period, from birth to middle childhood (puberty).
- Critical periods exist for many species.



# The input

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adults and older children at home provide language samples for the child to work with.

they usually do not talk to the child the same way they would talk to an adult. This simplified speech style, is called **child directed speech (CDS)** or caregiver speech or motherese.

CDS – frequent use of questions, shorter, simpler sentences, exaggerated intonation, extra loud, longer pauses.

But studies show that CDS does not significantly affect children's language development



# Do children learn through imitation?

- Early theories of language acquisition were influenced by the school of Behaviorism, which viewed language as a verbal behaviour – i.e. through imitation, reinforcement, analogy etc. But this was refuted soon.

CHILD: My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

ADULT: Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?

CHILD: Yes.

ADULT: What did you say she did?

CHILD: She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

ADULT: Did you say she held them tightly?

CHILD: No, she holded them loosely.

Children do not hear words like *holded* and yet they produce them.

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ADULT: He's going out.  
ADULT: That's an old-time train.  
ADULT: Adam, say what I say.  
Where can I put them?

CHILD: He go out.  
CHILD: Old-time train.  
CHILD: Where I can put them?

Even when children are trying to imitate what they hear, they are unable to produce sentences outside of the rules of their developing grammars.



# Do children learn through correction and reinforcement

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Behaviourists would also argue that children learn to produce correct sentences because they are positively reinforced ("rewarded") when they say something grammatical and negatively reinforced ("punished") when they say something ungrammatical.

Studies show that parents generally do not correct children, and even when they do, they correct content and mispronunciation rather than grammar.

Adults sometimes recast children's utterances into adultlike form

Child	Mother
It fall.	It fell?
Where is them?	They're at home.
It doing dancing.	It's dancing, yes.



## Children can't seem to correct themselves when the adults want them to

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CHILD: Nobody don't like me.

MOTHER: No, say "Nobody likes me."

CHILD: Nobody don't like me.

(dialogue repeated eight times)

MOTHER: Now, listen carefully; say "Nobody likes me."

CHILD: Oh, nobody don't likes me.



# Do children learn through analogy?

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- It has been suggested that children put words together to form phrases and sentences by analogy i.e. by hearing a sentence and using it as a model to form other sentences.

1) Adult: I painted a red barn

2) Child: I painted a blue barn

3) Adult: I painted a barn red

4) Child: \*I saw a barn red



# If question formation was learnt via analogy

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- 1) The boy was sleeping
- 2) Was the boy sleeping?
- 3) The boy who is sleeping is dreaming about a new car
- 4) \*Is the boy who sleeping is dreaming about a new car?

**Children do not make errors of the kind in (4).**



# The Innateness hypothesis

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- Children extract rules of the grammar of the language they hear around them. This is true if a children is learning one language, two languages or more, or a signed language.
- All human offspring exposed to human acculturation will naturally learn language. This will happen without explicit instruction. Just as how we learn to walk.
- Across the world, children learning different languages, under different cultural and social circumstances, are found to go through the same developmental stages.
- These factors lead many linguists to believe that children are equipped with an innate blueprint for language – called **Universal Grammar (UG)** – which helps children in the task of constructing the grammar of their language. This is called the **innateness hypothesis**.



# Poverty of stimulus

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- We end up knowing far more language than what we hear around us. This is called the poverty of stimulus argument.
- The input is:
  - incomplete (ungrammatical and incomplete sentences)
  - noisy (slips of the tongue, false starts)

Children construct structure dependent rules, like the English question formation rule.

The innateness hypothesis is an answer to the logical problem of language acquisition i.e. children acquire a complex grammar quickly and easily without any particular help beyond exposure to language because they do not start from scratch. UG gives them a head start.



# The stages or “milestones” in the path of language acquisition

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- **Cooing (around 4 months)** – speech like sounds – developing the ability to bring the back of the tongue into regular contact with the back of the palate
- **Babbling (between 6 to 10 months)** – vowels and consonants and combinations (ga-ga-ga, da-da-da) – recognizable intonation patterns
- **The one-word stage (between 12 and 18 months)** – single words for everyday objects (milk, cat, cup, spoon, bus)
- **The two-word stage (between 18 and 20 months)** – vocabulary moves beyond fifty words, baby chair, mommy eat, cat bad
- **Telegraphic speech (2 to 2;6 months)** – lots of variation in word forms (inflections) – this shoes all wet, cat drink milk, daddy go bye-bye.



Pages 324 to 332 of Fromkin (part of Chapter 7 “Language Acquisition”)

Pages 170 to 176 of Yule (part of Chapter 13 “First language acquisition”)

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## **Compulsory Readings**



## Other resources

Patricia Kuhl on the “Linguistic genius of babies”  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/patricia\\_kuhl\\_the\\_linguistic\\_genius\\_of\\_babies](https://www.ted.com/talks/patricia_kuhl_the_linguistic_genius_of_babies)

PSY121 “Language Acquisition I” from The Virtual Linguistics Campus  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prMGbLrbudA>

“Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar” by The Ling Space  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLNFGWJ0XjA>