

PSY BC 3369
Seminar in Language Development
Fall 2004

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Class meeting: T 11-12:50, 214 Milbank

Textbook and readings

Erika Hoff, *Language Development, 3rd Ed.* Wadsworth, 2005
(Available at Labyrinth Books, 526 West 112th Street)
Selected articles from the research literature (to be posted on CourseWorks)

Course description

Language is central to the human experience. It arises in all cultures, and can be learned effortlessly by any child. In fact, children can't resist it -- deprive them of language, and they will invent their own. Oddly, we lose this ability to learn language as we age, even though other mental skills improve. The structure of languages, and the way they are learned, reflect the intricate organizational power of the mind of the human child.

This is a seminar on the acquisition of a first language by children. We will discuss the acquisition of the sounds of language, the meaning of language, and the structure of phrases and sentences. Although much of the literature on language development involves the acquisition of English, we will also examine, wherever possible, the acquisition of other spoken languages, as well as the acquisition of sign languages. We will discuss both the process of acquisition and the competing theoretical explanations of that process. Particular emphasis will be placed on discovering the mechanisms children possess that enable them to learn language, and the resulting impact of those mechanisms on languages themselves.

Course format and expectations

Discussions: The first three class meetings will provide a foundation in linguistic structure, and will consist of an explanatory session led by the instructor followed by group exercises. During the six weeks that follow, we will discuss the topics listed below. All members of the seminar will read the chapter and articles listed, and will post a proposed discussion question or reaction to the CourseWorks online discussion board by the Friday preceding class. Each meeting will be led by two or three members of the seminar, who will begin with a brief summary of the articles assigned, and then present to the group a set of questions (drawn from the postings to the discussion board) designed to facilitate a discussion of the central issues in the readings. Each member is expected to take at least one turn as discussion leader.

Presentations: During the final four weeks of class, we will turn to current controversies in the field of language development. At each meeting, we will hear presentations on two of the controversial topics listed below. Note that each topic in the list is followed by an article from the primary research literature. The article presents either an early perspective of the topic, or one view in a polarized debate. For each topic, two co-presenters are responsible for seeking out other readings from the current literature that complement the assigned reading. They will then give a presentation of the controversy to the group, and take questions from the group. Each member is expected to take a turn as a co-presenter. Copies of the additional readings should be given to the instructor BEFORE the class meeting that is a week prior to the relevant meeting, so they can be made available to the rest of the group. Student-initiated topics will be

enthusiastically considered in lieu of the suggested topics; a few additional alternatives are suggested at the bottom of the syllabus.

Papers: Individual research papers will provide students with an opportunity to discuss their chosen controversial topic in more detail. Abstracts and proposed bibliographies will be due October 29. The reference articles should be selected from primary published scientific sources. First drafts are due a week before the in-class presentation. You will then have an opportunity to revise your papers before turning in the final draft by the last day of class. The papers should follow the citation guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Note that while the in-class presentations are collaborative, research papers should be written independently.

Grading: Grades will be based on the facilitation of the group discussion (20%), the presentation of a current controversial topic (20%), weekly class participation and preparation (20%), the abstract and first draft (10%) and the final version of the paper (30%).

Course Schedule

Week 1: 9/7

Introduction, course overview

Week 2: 9/14

Foundations in Morphology

Hoff, Chapter 1

Akmajian, A., Demers, R. A., Farmer, A. K., & Harnish, R. M. (1995). *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 11-52.

Problem set 1: Morphology distributed.

Week 3: 9/21

Foundations in Syntax

Hoff, Chapter 5

Fromkin, V. & Rodman, R. (1998). *An Introduction to Language, sixth edition*. New York: Harcourt Brace. 105-156.

Pinker, S. (1994). *The Language Instinct*. New York: Morrow. 83-125.

Problem set 1 due.

Problem set 2: Syntax distributed.

SELECTION OF CLASS DISCUSSION LEADERS FOR WEEKS 6-10

Week 4: 9/28

Video

Week 5: [date and time to be rescheduled]

Phonology: Learning the sounds of language

Hoff, Chapter 3

Eimas, P. D., Siqueland, E. R., Jusczyk, P., Vigorito, J. (1971). Speech perception in infants. *Science*, 171, 303-306.

Petitto, L. A., Marentette, P. F. (1991). Babbling in the manual mode: evidence for the ontogeny of language. *Science*, 251, 1493-6.

Werker, J. F., and Tees, R. C. (1999). Influences on infant speech processing: Toward a new synthesis. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 509-535.

Problem set 2 due.

Week 6: 10/12**Lexical Development: Learning Words**

Hoff, Chapter 4

Markman, E., (1990). Constraints children place on word meanings. *Cognitive Science*, 14, 57-77.

Gleitman, L. R., & Gleitman, H. (1992). A picture is worth a thousand words, but that's the problem: The role of syntax in vocabulary acquisition. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 1,1, 31-35.

Saffran, J. R., Aslin, R.N., & Newport, E. L. (1996). Statistical learning by 8-month old infants. *Science*, 274, 1926-1928.

10/15 Friday: PAPER & PRESENTATION TOPICS DUE by 5pm over email.

Week 7: 10/19**Critical periods in acquisition**

Hoff, Chapter 2

Newport, E. L. (1990). Maturation constraints on language learning. *Cognitive Science*, 14.

Curtiss, S., Fromkin, V., Krashen, S., Rigler, D., & Rigler, M. (1974). The linguistic development of Genie. *Language*, 50, 528-554.

Marler, P. (1991). The instinct to learn. In S. Carey & R. Gelman (Eds.), *The Epigenesis of Mind: Essays on Biology and Cognition*, Erlbaum. 37-66.

Week 8: 10/26**Language origins and language change: the role of acquisition**

Bickerton, D. (1984). The language bioprogram hypothesis. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 7, 2,173-188.

Senghas, A., Kita, S., Özyürek, A. (2004). Children Creating Core Properties of Language: Evidence from an Emerging Sign Language in Nicaragua. *Science*, 305.

Tomasello, M. (2003). On the different origins of symbols and grammar. In M. H. Christiansen and S. Kirby (Eds.), *Language Evolution*, Oxford. 94-110.

Pinker, S. (2003). Language as an adaptation to the cognitive niche. In M. H. Christiansen and S. Kirby (Eds.), *Language Evolution*, Oxford. 16-37.

Corballis, M. (2002) Did language evolve from manual gestures? In A. Wray (Ed.), *The Transition to Language*, Oxford. 161-179.

10/29 Friday: PAPER ABSTRACTS AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES DUE by 5pm over email.

Week 9: 11/2**Election Holiday: no class meeting****Week 10: 11/9****Language acquisition and theory of mind**

Tager-Flusberg, H. (1997). Language acquisition and theory of mind. In L. B. Adamson & M. A. Ronski (Eds.), *Communication and language acquisition: Discoveries from atypical development*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes. 135-160.

de Villiers, J. G., & Pyers, J. E. (2002). Complements to cognition: a longitudinal study of the relationship between complex syntax and false-belief- understanding. *Cognitive Development*, 17(1), 1037-1060.

Perner, J., Ruffman, T., & Leekam, S. R. (1994). Theory of Mind Is Contagious - You Catch It from Your Sibs. *Child Development*, 65(4), 1228-1238.

Weeks 11-14: 11/16 to 12/7

Student Research Presentations (2 topics per week)

FIRST DRAFTS OF PAPERS DUE ONE WEEK BEFORE PRESENTATION

Language and thought

Li, P., & Gleitman, L. (2002). Turning the tables: language and spatial reasoning. *Cognition*, 83, 265-294.

Levinson, S., Kita, S., Haun, D., & Rasch, B. H. (2002). Returning the tables: language affects spatial reasoning. *Cognition*, 84, 155-188.

Whorf, B. (1956). *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Language development and deafness

Supalla, S. J. (1991). Manually coded English: The modality question in signed language development. In P. Siple & S. D. Fischer (Eds.), *Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research, Volume 2: Psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 85-109.

Goldin-Meadow, S., & Mylander, C. (1990). Beyond the input given: The child's role in the acquisition of language. *Language*, 66:2.

Animal communication and the implications for human language

Marler, P., & Tenaza, R. (1977). Signalling behavior of apes with special reference to vocalization. In T. A. Sebeok (Ed.), *How Animals Communicate*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 965-1033.

The learning of language by artificial devices

Rumelhart, D. E., & McClelland, J. L. (1986). On learning the past tenses of English verbs. In *Parallel Distributed Processing, volume 2*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Child-directed speech

Newport, E. L., Gleitman, H., and Gleitman, L. (1977). Mother, I'd rather do it myself: Some effects and non-effects of maternal speech style. In C. E. Snow & C. A. Ferguson (Eds.), *Talking to children: Language input and acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 109-150.

Negative evidence

Brown, R., & Hanlon, C. (1970). Derivational complexity and order of acquisition in child speech. In J. Hayes (Ed.), *Cognition and the development of language*, New York: Wiley, 11-54.

Williams Syndrome

Bellugi, U., Marks, S., Bihrlé, A., & Sabo, H. (1993). Dissociation between language and cognitive functions in Williams Syndrome. In D. Bishop and K. Mogford (Eds.) *Language Development in Exceptional Children*. Hove, England: Erlbaum.

Specific Language Impairment

Gopnik, M., & Crago, M. B. (1991). Familial aggregation of a developmental language disorder. *Cognition*, 39, 1-50.

Language learnability

Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal Behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Chomsky, N. (1959). A Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior. *Language*, 35: 26-58.

FINAL VERSION OF PAPERS DUE BY THE LAST CLASS MEETING

Alternative presentation topics:

- Gesture and early reference
- Natural selection and linguistic form
- Second language learning and bilingualism
- The language of education and the Ebonics debate
- Syntactic and semantic bootstrapping
- Statistical learning and parsing
- Prelinguistic “language” in infants
- Learning language with a cochlear implant
- Language acquisition among other special populations: (autism, blindness, dyslexia, mental retardation, Down Syndrome, etc.)

If class is scheduled on a day on which you will be unable to attend because of a religious observance, please speak to the instructor before the second class meeting so we can make alternative arrangements. Also, if anyone requires accommodation for a specific disability, please notify the Office for Disability Services, and speak to the instructor at the close of the first class meeting.