

Child Language Acquisition

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How do
children
do it?

What do
they do?



Some simple facts

- Only humans have a form of communication which we call **Language**.
- There are approximately **6,000 languages in the world**.
- Any normal child growing up (say, from prenatal to infancy to 5 y.o.) in any language environment **will master the local language**.
- Many exceptional children, *i.e.* blind, deaf, cognitively deficient, neurologically impaired, *etc.* **may exhibit essentially normal language development**.
- Mastery of Language is **achieved without explicit instruction**.

The Central Mystery

How does a native language develop in children?

OR

How do children acquire their native language?

What are these two approaches?

■ Acquisition

- Language learning is just like learning anything else – it depends on intelligence and an ability to solve problems



■ Development

- The brain is programmed for language, just like learning to walk – it is like a form of physical growth



Compromise? How much is learned and how much built in?

Necessary Questions

- *What is Language?* In what ways are all natural languages alike? What ways are they different? What distinguishes natural languages from animal communication systems?
- **THIS IS THE DOMAIN OF LINGUISTS.**

More Necessary Questions

- *What is learning?* How do children develop mastery in non-linguistic domains such as facial recognition or object recognition or concept formation?
- **THIS IS THE DOMAIN OF DEVELOPMENTAL OR COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGISTS.**

Still more necessary questions...

- *What is language learning?* How do children develop mastery of their native language? Do they employ the same operations as in non-linguistic skills?
- **THIS IS THE DOMAIN OF PSYCHO-LINGUISTS.**

What's in a theory of acquisition?

- **Learnability**: the theory must assume mechanisms which are adequate to acquire a natural language and which, thereby, facilitate the acquisition of language in the first place.
- **Equipotentiality**: the theory should not postulate mechanisms which solely facilitate the acquisition of a favorite grammar, but the theory should account for the acquisition of all natural languages.
- **Time**: the theory should account for acquisition in real time.
- **Input**: the mechanisms invoked by the theory should operate on demonstrably plausible data.
- **Development**: the theory should predict stages of attested development.
- **Cognitive**: the mechanisms appealed to for the acquisition of language should not be incommensurable with the general mechanisms of cognition.

Rather than...

- Tackling language all at once (it's complicated)
- Subcomponents of Language
 - Speech perception/production
 - Words
 - Syntax
 - Pragmatics (use of language)
 - The brain may be quite important....
 - What if the process goes wrong somehow?