

Today

- ❑ How do children acquire language?
- ❑ Innateness
- ❑ Critical period

Reading: 9.3





Language acquisition

- How do children learn language?



Imitation?

Observation: Children of French-speaking parents speak French

Conclusion: Children must learn language by imitating their parents

BUT...

Sometimes language is not imitated

- 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.

Conclusion: Child has learned the English regular past tense rule. But her grammar does not admit exceptions to this rule (irregular verbs)

Sometimes language is not imitated

- Children say things parents never say
 - Phonological: [fɪs] 'fish', [gɑːɡi] 'doggie'
 - Morphological: *goed*, *runned*, *mouses*
 - Syntactic: "I am cute, *amn't* I?"

= **Overgeneralizations:** when learned rules are applied incorrectly (via hypothesis testing) to irregular forms



Teaching/reinforcement?

- Maybe children are *taught* rules that are reinforced when applied correctly, and are corrected when applied in error

BUT...



Sometimes language is not taught

- We know many rules of language that we were not taught

Phonological rules

□ Past tense of:

- walk
- jog
- lift

→ Add [-t], [-d], or [´d]

□ Plural of:

- cat
- dog
- fish

→ Add [-s], [-z], or [-´z]

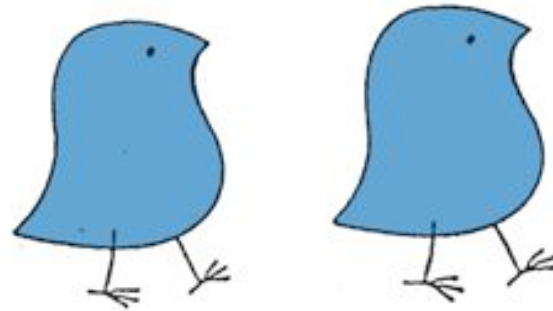
Allomorph: a variant of a morpheme

--morphemes appear in different forms,
depending on the phonetic context in
which they occur

The Wug Test



This is a wug.



Now there is another one.
There are two of them.
There are two —.

Morphological rules

- Expletive infixation:
 - Insert expletive (e.g., 'bloody', 'freakin', 'f*ckin'...) into a word for emphasis

e.g., fan-*bloody*-tastic
abso-*freakin'*-lutely
guaran-*dam**-tee
ri-*goshdarn*-diculous

→ Oklahoma, California, Texas? Iowa?

And...

we sometimes don't learn things when they are explicitly pointed out...

I **gots** a **question**. You mean 'I have a question?' I **have** a **question**. Question [kwEs-tʃn]. **Question**...





Sometimes language can't be taught

Child: Nobody don't like me.

Adult: No, say "Nobody likes me."

Child: Nobody don't like me.

(dialogue repeated eight times)

Adult: Now, listen carefully. Say, "Nobody likes me."

Child: Oh, nobody don't *likes* me.



How do we acquire language?

The Problem:

- Rules of grammar are unconscious
- Language learning process is unconscious



Solution: Innateness

- ❑ Humans are *genetically predisposed* to acquire language
- ❑ Humans draw upon innate knowledge when learning language
- ❑ Such innate knowledge is known as **Universal Grammar**



Evidence for innateness

□ Critical Period

- Eric Lenneberg (1960s)
- There is a critical period of time (from birth until about puberty) when language must be acquired; after this period, normal language acquisition cannot take place



Support for critical period

- **Brain plasticity:** children, but not adults, can recover from severe left hemisphere damage
 - Younger children recover more completely than older children



Support for critical period

- 'Wild Children'
 - Children with little or no exposure to language due to unfortunate circumstances

Genie



- ❑ Discovered in 1970, 13 1/2 yrs. old
- ❑ She was never spoken to or allowed to speak
- ❑ After intervention, began to learn language, though slowly
- ❑ But she never learned language normally (level of 2 1/2 yrs. old)