

# SSP100 Class Notes

## Child Language Acquisition: Some Basic Concepts

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### **Innateness and Universal Grammar** Chomskian claim:

- There is a class of possible natural languages determined by innate principles that form part of our genetic endowment.
- This class (although possibly infinite) is mathematically tiny compared to the space of theoretically conceivable languages.
- Languages vary according to certain remaining open *parameters*.
- Acquiring language is primarily a matter of determining the correct parameters.

### **Evidence for innateness Poverty of the stimulus** Another Chomskian claim: given the limited evidence children have about the structure of language, only innate principles can explain observed acquisition.

**Motherese** (“*mamanaise*”) Note that although parents do not literally teach their children language, but (in Western cultures) they do modify their language for children. “Roger Brown and Camille Hanlon (1970) attempted to test B. F. Skinner’s behaviorist claim that language learning depends on parents’ reinforcement of children’s grammatical behaviors. Using transcripts of naturalistic parent-child dialogue, they divided children’s sentences into ones that were grammatically well-formed and ones that contained grammatical errors. They then divided adults’ responses to those sentences into ones that expressed some kind of approval (e.g., “yes, that’s good”) and those that expressed some kind of disapproval. They looked for a correlation, but failed to find one: parents did not differentially express approval or disapproval to their children contingent on whether the child’s prior utterance was well-formed or not (approval depends, instead, on whether the child’s utterance was true).”

Brown and Hanlon also looked at children's well-formed and badly-formed questions, and whether parents seemed to answer them appropriately, as if they understood them, or with non sequiturs. They found parents do not understand their children's well-formed questions better than their badly-formed ones." (Pinker, in Gleitman ed.)

**Overgeneralization**

**Critical Period**

**Feral children**

**Second language acquisition**

**Developmental progression**

**Comprehension-production lag** (Video)

**Blocking effects** (Video)