LING-UA 1 *Language*

Acquisition & Signed Langauges, FRH Ch. 9

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Week 14 3:30PM, 8 December 2025

Logistics

- **Exam 3:**
  - Tuesday, 16 Dec, 2–3:15PM (during class)
  - **19 University Place, # 102** (new room)
  - Bring a laptop/tablet (on Brightspace)
  - ~30 multiple choice questions, 3–5 from each lecture since Exam 2
  - **Review Session** on Monday 15 Dec, after recitation (4:45–close)
- **HW 8:**
  - Due **tonight @ 10PM**!
- **Course Feedback :)**

Questions from HW/Lecture?

The Acquisition Problem

- Children are **very good** at acquiring language
  - ≈ "Lincoln Center Violinist"
  - ... on the basis of *very minimal data*
  - ... with almost only *positive evidence*
  - ... and arrive at suspiciously regular generalizations
- **How?**

Poverty of the Stimulus & UG

- **Poverty of the Stimulus** (Chomsky):
  - Linguistic input (child-directed speech) is too *limited* & too *simplistic* for a general learner
  - Learned generalizations are too structured, cross-linguistically, to be "random" conclusions in an unrestricted search space
  - Must postulate **some restriction** on the hypothesis space
- We call this restriction **Universal Grammar**
  - Limits possibility of what human language faculty expresses
  - Enables rapid acquisition
  - Part of neurobiology
  - Parametric

Acquisition Timeline

- Starts between womb and 6mo
- Ends after ‘critical period’
  - Driven by neuroplasticity
  - Not language-specific
  - Not human-specific
  - Need to acquire language before exiting!
- Proceeds in stages
  - Ordering consistent, individual duration may vary
- *Comprehend* patterns before *producing* them

Stages of Acquisition

- Physiological basis
- Babbling
- Holophrasis (=1-word Production)
- 2-word Production
- Telegraphic
  - No inflection $\longrightarrow$ inflection, word order, negation
- Done c. 3yrs

Phonological Acquisition

- Children may learn distinct phonological forms but produce merged phonetic forms: [maus] for both *mouth* and *mouse*

Semantic Acquisition

- Infants can learn syllable–object pairings
- **Overextension:** child's words are broader than adult's (*ball* = all round things)
- **Whole object principle:** assume a new term means the whole thing
  - cf. Quine's *gavagai*
- **Mutual exclusivity:** assume a 1:1 correspondence between forms and meanings
  - cf. plastic/pewter cups/tongs, *cup* blocks hyp. that *biff*=*cup*

Morphology Acquisition

- Start with individual form memorization
- Form an (over)generalization of rules (overextension)
- Re-learn exceptions to rule

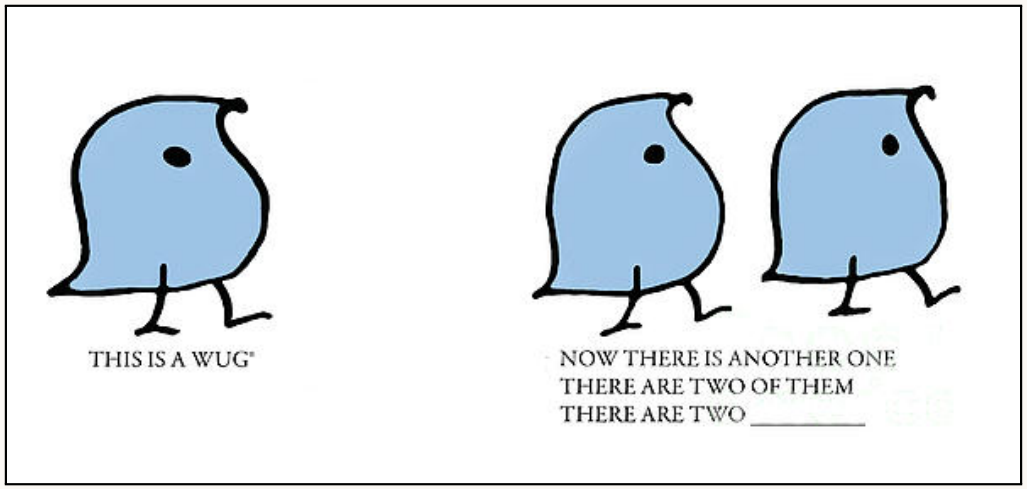

Figure: Berko's Wug Test for allomorphy

Comprehension & Production

- Children can recognize "algebraic" patterns before producing them (Marcus)
  - *la ta la, ga na ga* $\longrightarrow$ *wo fe wo, *wo fe fe*
- Overextension in production, but not comprehension
  - Why? recognition vs recognition + recall?

Acquisition as Parameter Setting

- If UG is parametric, then acquisition = setting parameters
  - head-directionality, null subjects, *wh*-fronting
- **Subset Principle:** start out with restrictive hypothesis, relax if given evidence

Signed Languages

- ASL is it's own language
  - Creole of many signed systems, incl. French signed language
  - Typically SVO, but not always
- Has phonology comparable to spoken phonology
  - Handshape, orientation, movement, location, non-manual markers
- Similar stages of acquisition to spoken languages
- Of comparable complexity to spoken languages

Feedback + Thanks :)