



24.904 | Spring 2022 | Undergraduate

Language Acquisition

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Syllabus

Course Meeting Times

Lectures: 2 sessions / week, 1.5 hours / session

Prerequisites

None

Course Description

This course is an introduction to language acquisition, a subfield of linguistics whose goal is to understand how humans acquire the ability to speak and understand a language. Speaking and understanding a language is a highly complex task that is routinely and seemingly effortlessly accomplished by competent (native) speakers of the language. Astonishingly, the system of grammatical knowledge that underlies this ability is acquired (if the acquisition process proceeds within a critical period in development) by all typically developing children without explicit instruction, in a very short period of time, and, again, seemingly effortlessly. By contrast, acquiring a second language after the critical period takes a long time, is effortful, usually requires explicit instruction and correction, and often fails to reach a level of competency that native speakers of the language have.

The course focuses on first language acquisition—the process by which native speakers of a language acquire the ability to speak and understand that language. We will discuss a set of selected topics in core areas of linguistic knowledge, including the lexicon (words), sentence structure, meaning composition, and pragmatics, from a developmental perspective. That is, we will aim to characterize (at times somewhat coarsely) the developmental path children seem to undergo as they acquire a particular property of language and then attempt to formulate a learning/acquisition problem: What is the initial state of knowledge? What is the final state of knowledge? What, if any, are intermediate states? What evidence do children have access to as they proceed through stages? What learning algorithms do children use to make sense of the evidence they encounter?

Readings

Mostly we will be reading original research papers, but I will occasionally assign overview chapters from the following textbook:

- Guasti, Maria Teresa (2017). *Language Acquisition: The Growth of Grammar* (2nd edition). MIT Press. ISBN: 9780262529389.

Problem Sets

There will be small problem sets most weeks (8 in all). The difficulty of these problems will vary. Some will be aimed at evaluating your knowledge of material covered in class. Others will be relatively open-ended and will require imagination and thought. Collaboration on assignments is permitted, indeed encouraged, when you are exploring solutions, but the actual write-ups must be done individually.

Problem sets will be graded according to the following scheme: ✓ (5 pts) for satisfactory work; ✓- (4 pts) for work that is substantive, but could be improved upon. Occasionally, exceptional work will receive ✓+ (5.5 pts). Anything below a ✓- level will need to be redone to receive any credit.

[Note: Problem sets not available to OpenCourseWare users.]

Mid-Term Exam

There will be one in-class, open-notes, midterm examination.

Final Paper

There is no final for this class. Instead, there is a final paper requirement. For more details, see the [Final Paper Assignment](#) page.

Class Attendance and Participation

Real-time discussion is vital for this class, so you are expected to attend all meetings and participate actively. I recognize, however, that the current state of the pandemic can create obstacles for attendance that are difficult to plan for. You can miss one meeting during the term without giving any explanation. Anything beyond that will need to be coordinated in advance (24-hour advance notice). If health-related issues or required quarantine make it impossible for you to attend two or more classes in a row, you should contact me as soon as you can, and we will find a way for you to stay current or catch up.

Grading

Grading is based on problem sets (40%), midterm (25%), final paper (25%), and class attendance and participation (10%).

Schedule

Below is our ambitious schedule. We will attempt to keep with it, but it is subject to modification.

SESSION #	TOPIC	READING ASSIGNMENTS
1	Foundations	
2	Biological bases of language	Dyer and Dickerson 1996 (required); Chomsky 1959
3	Biological bases of language, continued	Senghas 1994, Bedny et al. 2014

SESSION #	TOPIC	READING ASSIGNMENTS
4	Word segmentation	Guasti Ch. 3 (required); Saffran et al. 1996; Gout et al. 2004
5	Word segmentation, continued	Shukla et al. 2011, Shi and Lepage 2008
6	Words and their meanings	Bloom 2000, Ch. 1; Bergelson & Swingley 2012
7	Words and their meanings, continued	Smith and Yu 2008; Woodard et al. 2016
8	Harder word meanings	Gleitman 1991 (required), Yuan and Fisher 2009
9	Early syntax	Guasti Ch. 4 through Section 4.4 (required); Shi & Melancon 2010
10	Syntax: Root infinitives	Guasti Ch. 4, through 4.5.2.2 (required); Wexler 2011
11	Syntax: Root infinitives, continued	
12	Passives	Maratsos 1985
13	Syntax: <i>Wh</i> -questions	Thornton 2011
14	Syntax: <i>Wh</i> -questions, continued	
15	Mid-term review	
16	Mid-term exam	
17	Syntax/semantics: Binding	Chien and Wexler 1990
18	Syntax/semantics: Binding, continued	
19	Quantification	Guasti Ch. 9 through Section 9.1 (required), Philip 2011
20	Quantification, continued	Aravind et al., 2017
21	Exhaustivity inferences	Noveck 2001; (required), Barner et al. 2011
22	Exhaustivity inferences, continued	
23	Presupposition	von Stechow lecture notes (required), Aravind et al. 2018
24	Presupposition, continued	




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