## Language Acquisition (615:322)

Professor Jennifer Austin

Fall 2014 Syllabus

Meeting time and place: Mondays 2:30-3:50PM and Wednesdays 1-2:20 PM, Conklin 446

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**Introduction:** We tend to take language acquisition for granted because normally developing children seem to acquire a language quickly and effortlessly. However, when examined carefully, it is clear that learning a language is one of the most formidable cognitive tasks that human beings face, one that is all the more remarkable because it is accomplished so early in life. In this class we will discuss what makes human language different from other animals’ communicative systems, and we will examine theories which try to explain what it is about the human brain that makes it uniquely able to acquire and use language. We will also compare language development in children to its acquisition by adults, and look at the effects of bilingualism on learning language.

**Learning goals:**

Linguistic analysis allows us to understand how people use and acquire languages, the quintessentially human abilities that set us apart from other species. It also provides us with tools for studying language in a rigorous, precise way that uncovers its structure and hidden patterns. By the end of this class, students will be able to:

* Understand basic characteristics of human languages including linguistic universals, how languages change, the formal structure of language, and the importance of considering social factors in language use
* Begin to analyze language scientifically, by using research methods for collecting data and testing hypotheses, as well as theoretical approaches to language analysis
* Recognize fundamental units of linguistic structure, including phonemes, morphemes, and syntactic phrases
* Understand how language is acquired by child and adult learners, including theories regarding the role of nature versus nurture in language acquisition, the effects of age, multilingualism, and input on acquisition

**Required Textbook**: Brooks, P & Kempe, V. (2012). *Language Development*. Blackwell: John Wiley and Sons. Available in the campus bookstore. There will also be required readings on Blackboard.

**Exams:** There will be a mid term and a final exam.

**Homework**: There will be 6 short homework assignments posted on Blackboard.

**Final project:** A 5-page final project consisting of a proposal for an original empirical study related to language acquisition. The review of background literature and the design for the project should cite at least 4 academic articles and should include a bibliography in APA format. I will give you more detailed information about the format and content of the project later in the semester (20% of final grade).

**Participation**: Students are expected to come to class and participate fully in the discussions, both in small groups and with the whole class. Please do not wander in and out of the room while class is in session. In addition, please do **not** use your cell phone during class. If I have to speak to you about your cell phone use in class, points will be deducted from your participation grade.

**Final Grades:**

Mid term exam: 20% of total grade

Final exam: 25% of total grade

Homework: 15% of total grade

Final project: 20% of total grade

Participation: 20% of total grade

**September**

Wednesday 9/3: Introduction; Reading for 9/8: *Language Development,* Ch. 1

Monday 9/8: How do infants acquire language? Reading for 9/10: *Language Development,* Ch. 2

Wednesday 9/10: Language learning before the first word. Reading for 9/15: *Language Development,* Ch. 3

Monday 9/15: How social and cognitive development support language acquisition.

Wednesday 9/17: Social and cognitive factors, continued; Homework 1 due. Reading for 9/22: *Language Development,* Ch. 4

Monday 9/22: Learning words and their meanings.

Wednesday 9/24: The acquisition of words, continued; Homework 2 due. Reading for 9/29: on Blackboard: “Syntax: The analysis of sentence structure” by William O’Grady

Monday 9/29: Introduction to syntax. Reading for 10/1: *Language Development,* Ch. 5

**October**

Wednesday 10/1: Acquiring syntax; Homework 3 due. Reading for 10/6 on Blackboard: "The nature of nurture" by Barbara Lust (*Child Language* Ch. 6).

Monday 10/6: The critical period hypothesis and the nature/nurture debate. Reading for 10/8: *Language Development,* Ch. 6

Wednesday 10/8: Language input to children

Monday 10/13: Mid-term review

Wednesday 10/15: Mid-term exam. Reading for 10/20 on Blackboard: “Phonology: The function and patterning of sounds”, by Michael Dobrovolsky and Francis Katamba

Monday 10/20: An introduction to phonology. Reading for 10/22 on Blackboard: "The acquisition of phonology" by Barbara Lust (*Child Language* Ch. 8).

Wednesday 10/22: The acquisition of phonology. Reading for 10/27: *Language Development,* Ch. 8

Monday 10/ 27: Language and cognitive development. Homework 4 due. Reading for 10/29 on Blackboard: "Bilingualism: The good, the bad, and the indifferent" by Ellen Bialystok.

Wednesday 10/29: Bilingualism and cognitive development. Reading for 11/3 on Blackboard: “Bilingualism in early childhood” by Silvina Montrul.

**November**

Monday 11/3: How does bilingualism affect language learning?

Wednesday 11/5: Bilingual language development through dual-immersion schools. Homework 5 due. Reading for 11/10: *Language Development,* Ch. 12

Monday 11/10: Language development and the brain

Wednesday 11/12 How language development affects the brain, continued; Homework 6 due. Reading for 11/17: *Language Development,* Ch. 9

Monday 11/17: Literacy and language development

Wednesday 11/19: Literacy and language development, continued. Reading for 11/17: *Language Development,* Ch. 10

Monday 11/24: Impairments in language development.

Due 11/24 in class: Please turn in the topic of your final project, plus 4 related references.

Wednesday 11/26: No class. Happy Thanksgiving!

**December**

Monday 12/1: Impairments in language development, continued.

Reading for 12/3 Reading for 11/17: *Language Development,* Ch. 11

Wednesday 12/3: Language acquisition in deaf children.

Monday 12/8: Language acquisition in deaf children, continued.

Wednesday 12/10: Final project due; final exam review.

### Required Readings (on Blackboard):

Bialystok, E. (2009). Bilingualism: The good, the bad, and the indifferent. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12 (1), 3-11.

Dobrovolsky, M & Katamba, F. (1996). Phonology: The function and patterning of

sounds. In W. O' Grady, M. Dobrovolsky & F. Katamba (Eds). *Contemporary linguistics: An introduction*, 3rd edition. Harlow: Longman, pp. 68-131.

Lust, B. (2006) *Child Language: Acquisition and Growth*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

Montrul, S. (2008). *Incomplete acquisition in bilingualism: Re-examining the age factor.*

Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

O’Grady, W. (1996). Syntax: The analysis of sentence structure. In W. O' Grady, M.

Dobrovolsky & F. Katamba (Eds). *Contemporary linguistics: An introduction*, 3rd edition. Harlow: Longman, pp. 181-244.