

# Language Acquisition

## PSYCHOLOGY 476: Spring 2007

### Straub 142

**Instructor:** Meredith Meyer (398 Straub, 346-4947)

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Office hours: Monday 11-12

Thursday 2-3

or by appointment

### **Required Reading:**

There is no required text for this course. Articles will be available on blackboard as .pdfs.

### **Overview:**

Acquiring language is one of the central accomplishments of human development, in part because language is the medium of choice for the vast majority of human communicative interactions. Possessing language makes it possible for us to engage in altogether unique and powerful forms of socio-cultural exchange, knowledge acquisition, and technological sophistication. Language is a remarkably complex form of communication, yet remarkably most children acquire it before they can even tie their shoes or ride a bike. For all these reasons, the study of language acquisition is a central topic across a diverse set of fields, including psychology, sociology, linguistics, cognitive science, anthropology, philosophy, and computer science.

In this course you will gain exposure to the issues driving current thinking about language acquisition as well as the methodologies that have been developed to investigate these issues. For example, we will consider questions such as the following:

- What is language? How does human language differ from other forms of communication?
- What abilities do infants possess that allow them to acquire language in a relatively short period of time?
- How do we assess infant knowledge?
- Why is it more difficult to acquire a high degree of fluency in a language if you begin in adulthood rather than childhood?
- What is it like to live without language?
- If language is lost – due to accident, illness, or other trauma – to what extent can it be regained?
- How crucial a role do adults play in fostering infants' language acquisition?
- Is language learning fundamentally different from the acquisition of any other skill?

The overarching goal motivating the course is that you will come away with a body of knowledge about techniques for investigating language and a new appreciation for the centrality of language to human social and cognitive functioning. My hope is that you will find the material in this course to be both fascinating and challenging.

### **Course Requirements:**

Grades for the course will be based on 1) **three in-class exams** (each worth 20% of the overall mark, 60% in all) , 2) one **observation paper** (worth 15% of the overall mark) and (3) one **research project** (25% of the final grade) in which you and a group analyze an available database of child speech samples that is accessible online. As part of a group, you will need to formulate a research question and hypotheses as well as perform a “mini” background literature search as part of this project. The final written product will take the form of an independently-written APA-style research paper.

**Three in-class exams** will account for 60% of your overall grade. The exams will be a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and essay. The exams are designed to help motivate you to keep up with the reading and to consolidate and integrate your growing knowledge about the psychology of language. **ALL EXAMS ARE CLOSED-BOOK AND MUST BE TAKEN TO PASS THE COURSE.** Make-up exams will be allowed only with appropriate documentation (e.g., doctor's note).

### **Observation Paper**

In this short (4-page double-spaced) paper, you will be observing the language use of a child under the age of three. Many of you will have access to young children through family or friends. If you find it impossible to find a “real life” child, you will make use of a child whose speech is transcribed on CHILDES, a publically available child speech database. In this paper, you will comment qualitatively on how the child communicates, integrating information learned in the class with your observations. Specific guidelines for this paper will be provided to you as the due date approaches.

### **Group-based Research Project.**

**Along with the other members of your group, you will conduct a study of child speech.**

(1) **Naturalistic child speech data** is available on CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System), a database consisting of transcribed speech between adults and children at all stages of language acquisition. A program called CLAN (Computerized Language Analysis) can also be downloaded to help collect your data. Instructions on how to download transcripts and how to use CLAN will be provided to you.

(2) **The group-based research project** will involve joining with other members of your group to design and carry out an investigation of a research question regarding everyday, naturalistic conversation. This project will account for 25% of your overall mark. The goal of this assignment is to encourage you to “go below the surface” of language and think deeply about underlying factors that give rise to, or impinge on, language development. I will provide a set of possible topics and recommended readings that you can consider for your group research project, but do not feel limited by this list. Once your group settles on a research question and a basic course of action, you will need to check them out with me in class on May 15<sup>th</sup> before you conduct your data collection and literature search.

(3) What you will ultimately hand in is an independently-generated, APA-style write-up of the research project. **\*You will conduct a literature search, devise hypotheses, collect, and analyze data WITH YOUR GROUP. However, ALL sections of the paper must be independently written, including the Results and References sections.\*\*** The research project write-up is due by 4 p.m. Thursday of Finals Week (June 14th) in the main office of the Psychology Department in Straub Hall.

**Extra Credit** You will have the opportunity to improve your grade by up to 2% by participating in the Human Subjects Pool. Each hour of study=1 credit=1%. You will need to assign the credit to this class (Psych 476) in order to receive extra credit. If you are unfamiliar with how to sign up for studies, please come talk to me. If you have participated in studies before but have forgotten your login information, please contact the human subjects coordinator, Jeff Loucks, at [hscoord@uoregon.edu](mailto:hscoord@uoregon.edu)

## **Rough Timetable of Events and Accompanying Readings**

<b><u>Approximate date</u></b>	<b><u>Topic</u></b>	<b><u>Text Readings</u></b>
Week 1	Language: What is it? Who has it? What's so special about it?	4/3: no reading due 4/5: Pinker (1994)
Week 2	Sound sense	4/10 Chapter 3 from Hoff 4/12 Maye, Werker, & Gerken (2002)
Week 3	First Words	4/17 Chapter 4 from Hoff 4/19 Saffran, Aslin, & Newport (1996)
Weeks 4-7	Theories of Language Acquisition I	4/24 TEST 1 4/26 Chomsky, Hauser, & Fitch (2001) 5/1 Tomasello (1995) 5/3 Baldwin (1991) & Kuhl (2004) 5/8 Gertner, Fisher, & Eisengart (2006) 5/10 Lidz et al.(2002) & Akhtar et al. (2002) 5/15 In-class check-in for projects 5/17 TEST 2
Week 8		5/22 Bilingualism, reading TBA 5/24 In-class movie, <i>Sound and Fury</i>
Week 9	Language and Communication in the Manual Modality	5/29 Goldin-Meadow (2003) 5/31 Goldin-Meadow (2005)
Week 10	Language in Special Populations	6/5 SLI and Williams Syndrome, Reading TBA 6/7 TEST 3

### **THREE IMPORTANT ADDITIONAL NOTES:**

**Academic Honesty:** As a member of the university community you are expected to be honest and forthright in all your academic endeavors. To falsify the results of one's research, to present the words, ideas, data, or work of another as one's own, or to cheat on an examination corrupts the essential process by which knowledge is advanced. All work submitted in this course must be your own and produced exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly acknowledged and documented. For the consequences of academic dishonesty, refer to the Schedule of Classes published quarterly. Violations will be taken seriously and are noted on student disciplinary records. If you are in doubt regarding any aspect of these issues as they pertain to this course, please consult with the instructor before you complete any relevant requirements of the course. (Text adopted here as recommended from the UO web site regarding academic honesty at: [http://studentlife.uoregon.edu/programs/student\\_judicial\\_affairs/](http://studentlife.uoregon.edu/programs/student_judicial_affairs/))

**Students For Whom English is Not Their Native Language:** Use of a dictionary during exams is allowed if you feel that this would be helpful. You will also be allowed extra time on the exams; however, the exam needs to be completed on the day that it is administered. Thus, if you plan on taking extra time, please make sure that you have time after class to continue and complete the test.

**Students with Disabilities:** If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please make arrangements to meet with the instructor during the first week of class. It would be wise to contact Disability Services (164 Oregon Hall, 346-1155). Also please request that the Counselor for Students with Disabilities send a letter verifying your disability. (Counselor for Students with Disabilities: Molly Sirois, 346-3211, 164 Oregon Hall, 346-1073, [sirois@uoregon.edu](mailto:sirois@uoregon.edu))

