

# First Language Acquisition

**EVE V. CLARK**

*Stanford University*



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# 1 Acquiring Language: Issues and Questions

Language is quintessentially human. We use spoken language every day, face-to-face, as a means of communication, and written language allows us to record and hold on to our history across generations. Language itself is very complex. It has a sound system that allows us to use numerous distinct words, a vocabulary of some 50,000 to 100,000 terms for many adults, and a series of constructions for relating these words. It allows us to express innumerable ideas, describe events, tell stories, recite poems, buy, sell, or bargain in markets, administer legal systems, make political speeches, and do the myriad other activities that make up the societies we live in. Language allows us to coordinate what we do with others, relay information, find out answers, and carry out everyday activities – gossiping, making puns, writing memos, reading newspapers, learning histories, enjoying novels, greeting friends, telling stories, selling cars, reading instructions – the list is unending. Language calls for an intricate web of skills we usually take for granted. It is an integral part of everyday life that we rely on to convey wants and needs, thoughts, concerns, and plans. Using language seems as natural as breathing or walking.

But babies are not born talking. They *learn* language, starting immediately from birth. What do they learn? They need sounds and words, meanings and constructions. They need to know what to use where and when, how to integrate language with other modes of communication, how to make themselves understood and how to understand others. How does this process take place? When do children master the skills needed for using language successfully? What stages do children go through as they learn to understand and talk? Do the languages they learn affect the way they think?

This book focusses on children's acquisition of a first language, the stages they go through, and how they use language as they learn. In this chapter,

I take up some of the issues in that process. I outline some of the theoretical approaches in the field and the assumptions they make before turning to the overall plan of the book.

### **Some Issues for Acquisition**

When children learn a first language, they could build on preexisting notions of what to represent with language as well as prior notions of communication. Or they could start from nothing and discover what is (and isn't) represented in language. And since languages differ, their acquisition might also be affected by the properties of each language. For example, the type of language could influence the order in which children acquire each system of the language and could also make some parts of a language harder or easier to acquire. Their acquisition could also be affected by social interaction and cognitive development. Factors like these could also determine whether language-learners follow the same path, detect and use the same patterns, and make the same inferences about meanings during acquisition.

### **A Tabula Rasa?**

Do children have to learn everything about language and language use from scratch? Do they start out at birth with John Locke's tabula rasa, or do they come with certain things already pre-wired? Debate over this has led many to draw strict lines between "nature" (any innate capacities and structure children are born with) and "nurture" (what they gain from experience). Biologists would generally argue that this dichotomy is a false one. From conception on, fetal development is shaped by maternal health and nutrition as well as by the fetal cells that are maturing, so to distinguish nature from nurture in development is close to impossible.

Since children are not born speaking, they must learn language. The question then becomes one of what they are born with that is required for this task. Do they come with innate learning mechanisms to get them started? Are such mechanisms general-purpose aids to learning or specific to language alone? What empirical findings could help answer these questions? A related issue is whether children are born with built-in linguistic categories and structures required for learning. Here again, there has been a great deal of debate. Some have proposed that children come with syntactic categories like "noun" or "verb" already wired in, along with certain structural arrays for combining them. The task would then be one of working out what counts as a noun or verb in the speech children hear. Others have argued that children can discover nouns and verbs by looking at all the linguistic contexts

each word occurs in. And still others have argued that they can discover nouns and verbs from the kinds of things they designate – nouns are for people, places, and things; verbs for actions. Even if children are born with a learning mechanism dedicated to language, the main proposals have focussed only on syntactic structure. The rest has to be learnt.

In language, children face a particularly intricate task for learning. Compare learning a language to learning how to put on socks and shoes or to brush one's teeth. It is clear that languages demand a lot more. They are highly complex systems whether one considers just the sound system or the vocabulary, or also syntactic constructions and word-structure. The structural elements are just half of what has to be learnt; the other half consists of the functions assigned to each element. Learners must master both structure and function to use language.

### Languages Differ

Languages aren't all cut from the identical pattern, and this makes a difference in acquisition. They differ in the range and combination of sounds they use – for instance, whether they allow only single consonants to begin a syllable (*top*) or also combinations of consonants (*stop*, *trip*); whether they use pure vowels or also diphthongs (combinations of vowels) in syllables (*heat* vs. *height*). They differ in how many word-classes they have. Some have nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions (e.g., English and French). Others place “adjectives” in with verbs. Some use prepositions (*in the boat*), some use postpositions (equivalent to *the boat in*), and some add special word-endings to the noun (here, *boat*) to capture the same meaning. Languages differ in how they indicate who is doing what to whom. Some use case endings on nouns for this (as in German, Finnish, or Latin), and others word order (as in English or Mandarin). A nominative case-ending and a first-position noun may do the same job in different languages.

Languages differ in whether word-order serves a grammatical purpose (identifying the subject or object, for instance) or a pragmatic one (identifying information as given or as new). They differ in the meanings that are packaged in words, not only in what they have words for (many kinds of camel, in Somali; many kinds of rice, in Thai; many colors, in most Western European languages) but also in just what meaning-combinations are carried by words (whether verbs of motion include information about manner, as in English *walk*, *run*, *stroll*, *trot*, *meander*, or not, as in languages like Spanish or Hebrew that contain fewer such verbs). Languages differ in how they express causation. They may use a lexical verb like *open* to mean ‘cause to open’ (*he opened the window*), rely on an auxiliary verb combined

with a lexical verb, as in French *faire marcher* ‘make walk’ (*il fait marcher le chien* ‘he makes-walk the dog’ = ‘he walks the dog’), or add an ending to the verb stem itself to make a verb into a causative, as in Turkish or Hindi.

Languages differ in their basic word-orders for subject, verb, and object. They may favor SVO or SOV, for example. And they display considerable consistency with the orders of other elements too. In SVO languages, adjectives usually follow their nouns (English is an exception here), and in SOV languages like Japanese, they precede them. The same holds for prepositions that precede their nouns in an SVO language like English but follow (and are called postpositions) in an SOV language like Japanese. Relative clauses fill the same positions as adjectives: In SVO languages, they generally follow the nouns they modify, and in SOV languages, they precede them. The basic word-order in a language is correlated with the order of elements in many other constructions of that language (Greenberg 1963, Hawkins 1988).

When languages combine one clause with another, one clause may be subordinated and introduced by a conjunction indicating whether the relation between the two is temporal (*when, before, while*), causal (*because*), or conditional (*if, unless*). In some, the subordinate clause can follow or precede the main clause, depending on the general flow of information – what’s given and what’s new. In others, it may be restricted to a single position relative to the main clause. For example, in Turkish and Japanese, both SOV languages, subordinate clauses must precede the main clause.

Languages are usually consistent both in their basic word-order and in the orders favored across a variety of constructions. These statistical universals are important for speaking and listening. The internal consistencies in a language help speakers keep track of what they are listening to and what they are planning to say themselves. They allow predictions about linguistic units and offer predictable frames for the presentation of information. So children need to learn general structural regularities in the language they’re acquiring – whether it is an SOV or SVO language, whether relative clauses and adjectives follow or precede the nominals they modify, whether locative phrases are signaled by prepositions or postpositions, and so on. These properties are important because, once speakers have identified them, they can rely on certain assumptions about the kind of information that can come next in an utterance.

Just as languages display consistent structural patterns, they display consistent lexical patterns in the semantic information they bundle together. Some languages combine information about motion and manner of motion, and put information about the path followed elsewhere. The English verb *stroll* conveys ‘move in a leisurely manner’, while a preposition like *along* marks the path taken, for example, *stroll along the bank*. Other languages

package motion and path together, and put manner elsewhere. The Spanish verb *bajar* conveys ‘go/move’ plus ‘down’ and *salir* conveys ‘go/move’ plus ‘out’. To indicate manner of motion, Spanish speakers must add a participle (*corriendo* ‘running’) or adverb (e.g., *rapidamente* ‘quickly’) to convey the equivalent of English *run down* (*bajar corriendo* or *bajar rapidamente*) (Talmy 1985). Children must learn how their language packages information at word-level.

Knowledge of structure and function underlies the assumptions speakers make in interpreting what they hear and in choosing how to convey their meaning when they speak. The structures and vocabulary of a language provide choices for speakers. There is no one-to-one mapping of linguistic constructions (and words) to each situation. Instead, speakers must choose how to represent a particular event to someone else. Did Justin chase the dog, or did the dog run away from Justin? Did Sophie come into the house or go into the house? Did Kate teach the children to tie knots, or did the children learn to tie knots from Kate? In each case, the choice of construction and words conveys a particular perspective on the event (Clark 1997). At the same time, the perspectives speakers can take may be limited by what is available in their language.

### Complexity for Learning

Languages differ in what is easier and what harder to learn. Researchers have distinguished two sources of complexity for learning: *conceptual* and *formal* complexity (e.g., Slobin 1973, 1985b). Conceptual complexity pertains to the complexity of the ideas being expressed in language. Children probably develop cognitively at about the same rate in similar societies all over the world. This in turn suggests that they should go through stages in cognitive development at the same rate and grasp similar ideas at about the same age. In general, they master simple conceptual distinctions before more complex ones: the notion of more than one (marked by a plural word-ending), say, before notions of truth or beauty, and the notion of an action being finished (marked by a perfective or past tense ending) before the notion of one event being contingent on another (*if X, Y*). In principle, children should master simpler distinctions before more complex ones.

But since languages differ, the same conceptual distinction may be expressed in a variety of forms. One language might opt for a single word-ending for ‘more than one’ and use this as an invariant form on every noun, much like the *-s* ending for plural in English. Another might make use of ten or more different plural markers depending on the gender of the noun (masculine, feminine, or neuter), the “shape” of the noun (e.g., whether

it ends in a consonant or a vowel), its use with a numeral (*five gold rings*) and what numeral (*five, ten, one hundred twenty*), and so on, much as in Russian or Arabic (see, e.g., Gvozdev 1961, Omar 1973). It should take children longer to learn how to express “more than one” in these languages than in English. For one thing, there are more forms to learn, and then there are conditions on when to use each one. Differences in formal complexity affect rate of acquisition.

While no one language appears to be easier to learn overall, there are many trade-offs from one language to another in what is easy and what is hard. The plural system for nouns in a language that uses just one ending to mark “more than one” should be easy. Yet the same language may have a very elaborate system of verb tenses and verb forms in each tense, which makes verbs hard to learn. Children may find some aspects of a language easier to master than others, and children exposed to different languages may well learn at different rates on equivalent parts of the system. To find out, we need to establish what’s hard and what’s easy in acquisition for each language.

### **Social Dimensions**

Language acquisition takes place in midconversation. Adults and children talk to each other; adults expect children to respond to requests and comments, and to indicate to their interlocutors what they are interested in as well as their needs and wants. When adults talk to children, they directly or indirectly offer them extensive information about their language. They set up both tacit and explicit expectations for when children should talk, what they should say, when and how they should respond to adult utterances; what counts as a turn in conversation, when (and when not) to take a turn; and what counts as an appropriate contribution in the ongoing exchange (Berko Gleason 1988). In the course of conversation, adults use the conventional words for objects and actions. This way, they provide words for whole arenas of experience – food, clothing, toys, pets, vehicles, birds, mammals, plants, gardens, farms, the seaside, mountain slopes, and many more. They also offer information about how words within a domain are related (Clark & Wong 2002).

Conversation demands that its participants attend to each other and to whatever is being talked about. This means keeping track of what others know at each point in the conversation. The participants share common ground and add to it with each utterance. Both joint attention and the updating of common ground play a role in acquisition (Clark 2002b). In learning to participate in conversations, children learn more of their language

and more about how to use it (Snow 1978). And in tuning in to a language, they tune in to those distinctions that are obligatory; they come to assume distinctions that are *always* encoded in that language but not necessarily in others. They learn to think – and plan – for speaking that language (Slobin 1996).

Conversation provides a forum for using language. It displays language embedded in larger systems for communication and so should present children with critical material for making sense of language as they try to understand others and make themselves understood. Conversational exchanges between children and adults should also be a forum for learning to become a member of the society and the culture. From birth on, the exchanges children participate in attune them to the language around them. This holds as much for sound patterns as for words or for constructions used to convey temporal and causal relations among events; as much for intonation contours and tone of voice (with positive or negative affect) as for details of constructing words from roots and affixes.

Understanding in conversation may depend as much on what is not said as on what is said. Knowing some of the elements of a language doesn't necessarily allow one to interpret utterances appropriately. One has to learn the conventions on use. For example, the request in English, *Can you open the door?*, is both a question about ability (*can*) and a request for someone to perform the action of opening. The context of use then determines how the addressee should construe it. What counts as a request or as an assertion and the range of forms that can be used depend on the conventions of the speech community. (These are not necessarily the same even in communities using the same language.) Construals also depend on the inferences that are licensed in context.

How do children learn linguistic conventions? For instance, the expected response to a question can depend on both the context and speaker. If a speaker repeats with question intonation what a child has just said, this conveys that the adult considers what the child said to be wrong. In everyday conversation, this typically leads the original speaker to offer some alternative. But in the classroom, teachers may question what children say to check on whether they really know, and this calls instead for the child to repeat the original utterance, not change it (Siegal 1997).

Language use is not uniform; it depends on whom one speaks to. In most communities, people speak differently to family members and friends from strangers; they distinguish formal from informal speech (e.g., with *vous* vs. *tu*); and they use a range of polite forms that differ in terms of address (*Ms. Pipon* vs. *Sophie*), word-choices (*that policeman* vs. *the cop*), and syntactic constructions (*Come here* vs. *Could you come here?*), depending



on the language and addressee. Learning what the conventions are, the “rules of use” for different occasions, takes time.

Language is not an autonomous system for communication. It is embedded in and supplemented by gesture, gaze, stance, facial expression, and voice quality in the full array of options people can use for communicating. In learning language, children may first rely on nonlinguistic options, both in their initial understanding and in their own early use. They might understand affect first from adult voice quality and gesture, and infer the locus of attention from adult gaze or stance before they understand that words pick out referents. And they might rely on iconic gestures referring to or anticipating reference to things later named with words. Adults may draw children *in* to language by leaning on nonlinguistic means to signal affect or to direct attention. They may even indicate to young children how things work at first through gestures rather than words.

### **Cognitive Dimensions**

What do children know by the time they start talking at age one? They have already had about twelve months of perceptual and conceptual development. They are adept at perceiving similarities, identifying objects and actions, recognizing faces, sorting like with like. They can orient objects and know where they are kept and how they are used (spoons, cups, bowls, bottle tops; shoes, socks, mittens; balls, dolls, soft toys, books; blankets, chairs, staircases). They know a good deal about their surroundings, about Euclidean space (up vs. down, back (not visible) vs. front (visible), side to side) and topological space (inside vs. outside, contained, attached, supported). They display memory for objects (persisting in looking for keys that have been covered with a cloth); they use “tools” (enlisting adult aid to get a box open); and they make use of pretense in play (moving a block while making car noises). In summary, they are setting up representations of what they see and know. They make use of these for recognition and recall, summoning them first with gestures and reenactments of events, and later with words (e.g., Piaget 1952, Werner & Kaplan 1963; see also H. Clark 1973).

Do children make use of this perceptual and conceptual knowledge as they acquire language? The answer has to be yes. When they learn to speak, they represent their experiences in words. They also draw on conceptual knowledge and its organization as they work out the meanings of new words and constructions. This is a major source of hypotheses about word meanings. Children use words to pick out categories of objects, whether “dog” or “dalmatian,” “pet” or “pest.” These categories may be at different levels

(compare “dog” to “dalmatian” [a kind of dog]), or they can be orthogonal to each other (compare “dog” to “pet” or “guard”). Children can use words with these meanings to pick out the same object from different perspectives. They can use other words to pick out actions, where their choices depend on the number of participants, the effects, the manner of acting, and the location or direction involved (compare throwing a ball, opening a door, drinking milk, pushing someone on a swing, walking, sitting down, swimming, and riding a bicycle). Children can also assign words to pick out relations in space (compare putting keys in a box, hanging a picture above the head of a bed, climbing down a ladder, sitting beside the fire, crawling across the floor, or looking at a lid on a box, at tiles above the sink, or at a screen in front of the fire). One issue for language acquisition is how children find out which meanings there are words for; another is just how they map each meaning to the right word.

How do children form conceptual categories in the first place? They start out, it seems, with the ability to group things by how similar they are. These early groupings are also influenced by perceptual Gestalts that highlight “figures” against “grounds.” Anything that moves stands out against its background and so is the figure. And when objects move, they move as a whole, so whole objects are more salient than any one part. Once children have represented an object-type, they can go on to attend to the actions and relations that link it to other things around it. These kinds of conceptual organization provide a starting point for what might also be represented in language.

Early conceptual organization also offers clues to how children might learn language. They must be able to use prior experience to recognize when objects or events recur. They need to set up representations of what they see, hear, touch, and taste so that they can recognize recurrences. Without such representations, they couldn’t categorize or organize experience. To do this, children must be able to detect similarity or degrees of similarity, a capacity that appears fundamental for all learning.

### **Learners and Learning**

Learners can be conservative or bold, or somewhere in between. When children learn language, they could go step by step, one form at a time, waiting for evidence from adult speech and rarely going beyond it – *go, run, fall, fell, cat, cats, feet*. They could generalize from a few forms to new instances – from *jump/jumped* to *run/runned*, from *cat/cats* to *man/mans*. They could go item by item then make some limited generalizations, with different children following different paths. Or they could generalize broadly, acting as if

all of language is orderly and rule governed (it isn't), and so regularize many irregular forms (e.g., *bringed*, *sitted*, *goed*, *foots*, *sheeps*, *mouses*).

Take the plural *-s* in English. It has three variants depending on the final sound of the stem, as in *cat/cats* [-s], *dog/dogs* [-z], and *horse/horses* [-Iz]. This is the regular plural form that appears on most nouns in English. It could be learnt by rote, with children adding one item at a time as they hear it. Their first version of a word could be singular or plural, depending on what they happen to hear first. So they might learn *cat* and then *cats*; *stairs* then *stair*; *dog* then *dogs*. Rote learning depends on children hearing each form so they gradually fill in the paradigm of singular and plural for each word. Rote learning should preclude errors like *mans* for the plural of *man* or *teeths* for the plural of *tooth*. It should also preclude children treating words like *house* and *purse* as if they were already plural. Yet children make both types of errors.

Suppose instead that children learn a few forms by rote and use those as models for deciding on the plural forms for new words: because of *cat-cats*, the plural of *rat* should be *rats*. Here children would be relying on *analogy* (Gentner & Medina 1998), using information about similar words (similar in, say, sound or meaning or both) in deciding what the plural (or singular) should be. Analogy can start from any point, with children choosing a regular or an irregular form. For instance, analogy from *dog-dogs* applied to *cat* and *sheep* yields *cats* and *sheeps*. Analogy from an irregular word (e.g., *foot*, *child*) runs into problems.

Children might instead consider all the forms accumulated so far and abstract a *rule* for the plural (Pinker 1999). This could be stated as "Add *-s* to nouns to form the plural." When the words are regular, children succeed in producing the correct forms; when they aren't, they overregularize. Just as for analogy, rules fail for irregular words. The rule applied to words like *foot*, *child*, or *mouse* does not result in the correct *feet*, *children*, and *mice*. These irregular words either require additional special rules or rote learning of each adult form.

Both analogy and rule work by adding a word-ending to the existing word. Children start with a source word, add something, and produce a new form. An alternative is to start from the goal – what the plural form should sound like – and adjust the singular word until it fits. Here children could use a *schema* or *template* for the plural (Bybee & Slobin 1982). The schema could be characterized as requiring a form ending in *-s*, roughly, PLURAL = [word+s]. If a word fits this schema (it already ends in *-s*), no change is required; if it doesn't, then the word must be adjusted until it does (by adding *-s*). The schema approach accounts for the same regular forms

as the analogy and rule approaches do, and it also accounts for why children fail to add a plural ending to nouns like *horse* or *rose*: They end in an *-s* sound and so already fit the schema for plural.

Do children depend on rote, analogy, rule, or schema? Which account best captures what they do with the regularities they detect in language? The answer depends on careful analysis of the forms children produce: what they get right and what they get wrong. One factor is the identification of recurring patterns and their frequency. Children hear instances of some nouns and verbs more frequently than others (*man* occurs many more times than *field*, and *put* more often than *yell*). This is token-frequency. They also hear some types of nouns and verbs more often than others: There are many more regular nouns (e.g., *book/books*, *cat/cats*, *chair/chairs*) than irregular nouns (e.g., *foot/feet*, *man/men*, *mouse/mice*) in English. The same goes for verbs: regular verbs (e.g., *walk/walked*, *open/opened*, *jump/jumped*) far outnumber irregular ones (e.g., *go/went*, *bring/brought*, *fall/fell*). To what extent does this token- or type-frequency play a role in children's generalizations?

Researchers agree that children must learn both sound systems and vocabulary. (How they learn them is another matter.) Sound systems are specific to each language, and children must learn the one they are exposed to (Jusczyk 1997, Vihman 1996). And vocabulary presents a formidable challenge. Adults know somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 distinct words, so the learning required here is extensive (Bloom 2000, Clark 1993). There is much less agreement about the learning of syntactic constructions. Do children rely on innate knowledge for these or do they learn them as they do words? The arguments for innateness have hinged largely on the putative difficulty of learning syntactic constructions from child-directed speech. Researchers have pointed to the ungrammaticality of adult-to-adult speech and also argued that some constructions are either absent or so rare as to make them unlearnable. If children acquire them anyway, they must be relying on some built-in knowledge. Both premisses here are in dispute – that child-directed speech is ungrammatical and that certain structures are unavailable in that speech.

What role do children play in learning? They could be passive recipients of the language directed to them, simply absorbing whatever they hear, or they could play an active role, selecting and generalizing about whatever they have taken in so far. To what extent are children miniature scientists: testing hypotheses and checking up on what they know about particular words or constructions? Do they detect patterns and apply them to new cases? Do they make inferences about possible meanings and make use of them in later word use? Overall, the role that *children* play provides critical information about

how (and what) they learn at each stage and about the learning mechanisms they rely on.

### Product versus Process

Some approaches to language acquisition focus on the *product* – the end state to be achieved – rather than on the *process*. This distinction tends to capture one difference between linguistic and psycholinguistic approaches to acquisition. Linguists tend to focus on the product, for instance, what a relative clause looks like, laid on the table for analysis. In contrast, the psycholinguist is more concerned with when the speaker needs a relative clause, how he accesses the pertinent structure, the phrases, words, syllables and sounds, and then produces the utterance itself piece by piece. This has led to differences in emphasis, with linguistic approaches focussing more on the adultlike nature of children's knowledge while psychological ones have focussed more on the changes that occur during development.

One linguistic approach known as parameter-setting proposes that children start out with default settings for *parameters* that capture all the dimensions that distinguish among languages. For instance, languages differ on whether they require subjects to be marked by a pronoun where there isn't a noun subject present. (Where they don't, languages typically mark person (e.g., *I, you, he*) and number (singular or plural) with endings on the verb, as in Italian.) This is called the Pro-drop parameter, and researchers have assumed that the default value is to drop pronoun subjects (much as in Italian or Spanish). Each parameter has a start-up setting (the default setting) and children begin there, regardless of the language to be acquired. Then, at a certain point in development, they identify the actual parameter-setting for that language (it is not clear what the critical data are) and from then on make adultlike use of the pertinent forms. What happens before a parameter is set is of scant interest. The main concern is with the parameters themselves, the values for each, and when the correct setting for each is triggered. Setting parameters is regarded by some as something that happens automatically when children reach the right age and stage of development. This leads researchers to ignore everything that happens before a parameter is set (e.g., Borer & Wexler 1987, Radford 1990). Children's errors prior to adultlike use and continuity in their attempts to convey a particular meaning are simply not relevant.

Other approaches regard *continuity* of expression and *function* as critical clues to tracing the path children follow as they acquire language. This holds for most processing approaches. For example, they may identify a particular conceptual distinction and then trace its expression by children as they

learn more about the conventions of a particular language. Take the notion of plurality, more than one. Children acquiring English often start out by using a word like *more* or a numeral like *two* to express this notion, as in *more shoe, two cup*. Only after that do they learn to add the plural ending (*shoes, cups*). The earlier expressions for plurality show that children have grasped the notion but haven't yet worked out how to express it in English. This comes back to the distinction between conceptual and formal complexity. Children may have acquired the pertinent concept (here, plurality) but not the forms that are conventional for its expression.

Processing approaches have also focussed on what children do at one stage compared to the next. One approach has been to look at where children start, what they attend to first, and what they change in their language as they get older. Their preferences and the changes they make can be captured as processing strategies or operating principles. For example, in producing words, children focus on the core word (the stem) first and on getting the initial sounds right. Here, the strategy can be represented as "Pay attention to the beginnings of words." This helps others recognize the words children are trying to say. Their next move is to start producing word-endings (like the plural, say): "Pay attention to the ends of words." But now they need to attend to the range of meanings conveyed by word-endings, so another strategy might be to look for endings that have a stable, identifiable meaning and to use those whenever needed.

Researchers have looked for consistencies in how children interpret and produce words from the earliest stages on and from those patterns have derived the strategies children seem to apply (e.g., Slobin 1985b). This approach relies on looking at both what children get right and what they get wrong. Sometimes they fail to produce a form altogether (*I throw ball*, without *a* or *the* before *ball*); at other times, they apply a form incorrectly (*bringed, foots*). This approach is concerned with learning and with how changes come about.

Processing approaches take account of the dynamic nature of conversation. Speakers interact with each other. They don't produce isolated sentences that stand on their own. Once someone has mentioned *Kate*, for example, the next speaker will use *she* (not *Kate*) to refer to her again. Or once someone has asked Rod whether he wants lasagna, he can answer *Just a little*, or *Yes please*. What these utterances refer to requires that we know that there was a prior offer, *Would you like some lasagna?* Without that, we can't give a full interpretation to *Yes please*. What someone says depends critically on what someone else has just said and often can't be interpreted without a whole sequence of contributions to the conversation. Imagine recording a conversation and then transcribing what only one of the speakers said.

It quickly becomes difficult or impossible to interpret what that person means. In fact, utterances depend on both conversational and physical context for interpretation (H. Clark 1996). This should hold even more strongly for young children whose utterances may consist of only one or two words.

### The Goal of Acquisition

The goal is to become a member of a community of speakers. This entails learning all the elements of a language, both structure and usage. Children need to learn the sound system, the *phonology*. This in turn means learning which sounds belong (sound segments like **p, b, t, d, s, z, a, i, u, e**), which sequences of sounds are legal in syllables and words (phonotactic constraints, e.g., *drip* but not *dlip* in English), stress patterns on words (e.g., *electric* vs. *electricity*), tone on words in a language like Mandarin or Hausa, and the intonation contours in sentences that distinguish a question from a statement (e.g., *Alan is coming at six o'clock?* vs. *Alan is coming at six o'clock*).

They need to learn about the structure of words, their *morphology*: whether they are made up of one syllable, two, or many (e.g., *pop*, *slipper*, *alligator*), along with their meanings. Words can be complex and made up of several building blocks in the form of suffixes or prefixes added to root forms (e.g., *write/writer*, *saddle/unsaddle*, *house-builder*, *push-chair*, *sun-rise*, *complexify*, *physicist*). These building blocks also allow for the construction of new words to express new meanings, meanings for which there is no existing conventional form. Words may form *paradigms*, groups that display regular alternations to mark particular meanings. In some languages, nouns can be singular or plural, for example (English *cat/cats*, *chair/chairs*, *horse/horses*), but not all of them belong to regular paradigms (English *mouse/mice* or *child/children*). Nouns may also have suffixes that show whether they have the role of subject (e.g., *The man was running*), object (e.g., *The dog chased the man*), indirect object (e.g., *The boy gave the book to the man*), and so on, as in German, Greek, or Finnish. These case endings, like plural endings in English, are generally fairly regular, with the same form used on many different nouns. There may be several plural endings for different sets of nouns (e.g., masculine, feminine, neuter; or common and neuter) and therefore several regular paradigms. Verbs may belong to many paradigms too, each one marking tenses differently, for example. In each instance, noun and verb endings add modifications to the basic meaning of the stems.

Speakers don't use just one word at a time. They combine them, and again the possible sequences of words in a language have to be learnt. This is the *syntax*. Just as with sounds, some sequences are legal, others not. In

English, adjectives precede the nouns they modify (e.g., *the green vine*, not \**the vine green*), articles like *a* or *the* and demonstratives like *that* also go before their nouns (e.g., *the whistle*, *that rosebush*). Relative clauses follow their nouns (e.g., *The wallaby that was hopping across the path was a female*). Subordinate clauses introduced by conjunctions like *if*, *because*, or *when* in English can be placed before or after main clauses (e.g., *When the bell rang, all the children came inside*, or *All the children came inside when the bell rang*), but in Turkish or Japanese, for instance, such clauses must precede the main clause. Some constructions allow a number of different nouns and verbs to be used in them; others may be very restricted. Just as with sounds and words, children have to learn what the possibilities are.

Language is used to convey *meaning*. Words, suffixes, and prefixes all carry meanings that are *conventional* (Lewis 1969). The speech community relies on all its members agreeing that *ball* means 'ball', *throw* means 'throw', and *sand* means 'sand'. These conventions are what make languages work. Without agreements about meanings, one couldn't rely on the fact that the next time someone uses *sand*, say, people hearing the word will interpret it in the same way. Conventions are critical in language use. They govern both word meanings and construction meanings. In learning a language, children must learn the conventions for that community.

Languages work in large part because they don't use needless duplication. Each conventional word differs from all its neighbors. Each word reflects a choice made by the speaker to convey one meaning rather than another and so *contrasts* with all the others (Clark 1990). If speakers wish to convey a meaning for which there is no conventional word, they can construct a new one to carry that meaning. This new word then contrasts with any previously established ones. For example, the verb *to skateboard* was introduced along with skateboards themselves to talk about a new method of travel. This verb immediately contrasted with all existing verbs for other means of moving (*to bicycle*, *to sled*, *to ski*, *to roller-skate*, etc.) (see Clark & Clark 1979). Language, and especially its vocabulary (the lexicon), is not static. Speakers coin new words as society changes and adds new inventions and new technologies. But each new word is only accepted if its meaning contrasts with the meanings of existing words. Conventionality and contrast are powerful pragmatic principles governing language use (Clark 1993).

Knowing what the conventions are for the elements of a language and knowing how to use them are two different things. Children must learn how each word and construction can be used to convey their intentions. They learn how to make assertions (*That's a tadpole*), requests (*Can you mend my yoyo?*), and promises (*I'll mow the lawn tomorrow*) (Austin 1962, H. Clark 1996, Levinson 1983). They learn what counts as polite (*Pick up the other one!* vs. *Could you bring in the other box?*), and how polite to be on



each occasion. They learn how to give directions and explanations, and how to tell stories. In summary, they need to learn to use language effectively, whatever the genre, whoever the addressee, and whatever the goal.

### Stages in Acquisition

Infants don't produce their first words until age one or later, but by three or four, they can talk quite fluently about some topics. This development is one we take as much for granted as the infant's transition from lying supine in the first few months to walking and running around by age one to two. Learning to talk is more complicated than learning to walk. Talking plays a major role in social communication and demands a grasp of all the local conventions of use in each speech community. Language use is an integral part of communication; it goes along with gesture, gaze, and other nonlinguistic means used to convey attitude and affect as well as speaker intentions.

As children learn to talk, they go through a series of stages, beginning with infancy when they are unable to converse and do not yet understand any language. They go from babbling at seven to ten months old, to producing their first recognizable words six to twelve months later. Then, within a few months, they combine words and gestures, and produce their first word combinations around age two. This is followed by the production of ever more complex, adultlike utterances, as they become active participants in conversation, taking turns and making appropriate contributions. They begin to use language for a larger array of functions – telling stories, explaining how a toy works, persuading a friend to do something, or giving someone directions for how to get somewhere. Between age one and age six, children acquire extensive skills in using language and sound quite adultlike much of the time. By around age ten to twelve, they have mastered many complex constructions, a good deal more vocabulary, and many uses of language.

Comprehension, throughout this process, tends to be far ahead of production. Children understand many words long before they can produce them, and this asymmetry between comprehension and production is lifelong: consider the number of dialects adults can understand without being able to produce more than two or three at most. For a second language, consider how much better people are at understanding than at speaking. The same holds true for a first language: comprehension remains ahead of production, but once production reaches a certain level, speakers tend to no longer notice any mismatch (but it remains). At the same time, mismatches play an important role in the process of acquisition: what children represent

for understanding, their representations for recognition and recall, provides targets for what their own production should sound like.

Is there continuity over stages? Do children try to express similar notions at successive points in development – whether issuing one word at a time, longer word-combinations, or adultlike phrases? How much consistency is there in the stages children go through as they learn the same language? How much for children learning different languages? Do children from different social classes go through the same stages provided they are learning the same language? Are these children exposed to the same amount and same range of child-directed speech?

### **Why Study Acquisition?**

In the late 19th century, the burgeoning study of child development emphasized language, and many researchers kept extensive diaries of their children's development, including language (e.g., Ament 1899, Baudouin de Courtenay 1974, Compayré 1896, Lindner 1898, Major 1906, Preyer 1882, Ronjat 1913, Stern & Stern 1928, Sully 1896, Taine 1870; see Blumenthal 1970). Because researchers lacked tools for preserving their observations, these records vary in quality. There was no audio- or videotape to record what happened and no International Phonetic Alphabet to help note children's exact pronunciations. Some, like Clara Stern and William Stern who kept a detailed diary, though, raised many issues that are still critical in the 21st century. These observational studies were followed by extensive records of children's vocabularies in terms of size and content at different ages. In the 1930s and 1940s in the United States, the emphasis remained on vocabulary size and sentence length, with little analysis of structure and no analysis of conversational skill.

In the 1960s, under Noam Chomsky's influence in linguistic theory, researchers renewed their interest in how children acquired language. Chomsky himself argued that children must rely on certain innate structures and mechanisms, specific to language, because it would be impossible for them to learn from adult speech alone (see Chapter 2). These claims became embedded in the Chomskyan approach, although few of his students did empirical research on language acquisition in children. Among psychologists who took up the challenge of studying language acquisition directly was Roger W. Brown. He in turn drew many of his students as well as others into the field during the 1960s and 1970s, made major contributions himself, and has had a lasting impact.

Initially, many studies of language acquisition were undertaken to assess the psychological reality of a linguistic proposal or to test the predictions of

linguistic theory against acquisition data. And here several problems arose immediately. First, linguistic theory for the most part is a theory about product and not process, so it was unclear what the predictions should be. Even when these appeared fairly clear, there was frequent disagreement on how to interpret findings inconsistent with the current linguistic theory, with linguists then dismissing acquisition data as irrelevant and, therefore, as no test for the theory. Second, linguistic theories displaced each other with some rapidity, so theoretical claims were even harder to evaluate. These factors led to some divergence in approach, with much of the research on language acquisition being carried out at some distance from theoretical claims in linguistics. This encouraged the development of other approaches to acquisition and led researchers to ask broader questions than they might have done otherwise.

Some of the current issues are still those that dominated debates about language acquisition after the publication of Chomsky's *Aspects of the theory of syntax* in 1965. One of these is whether there is a mechanism for acquisition specialized for language alone, independent of other cognitive skills. This claim has generally been accompanied by the claim that some knowledge about language is also innate, with syntactic categories (word-classes like noun and verb) and basic syntactic structure (subject and predicate, along with other basic grammatical relations, for example) being the prime candidates. This in turn has led to discussion of how much of language is learnable and under what conditions (where the focus has again usually been on syntax alone); whether there is a critical period for language learning, after which humans can no longer learn a language in much the same way that goslings can no longer imprint on a mother goose or white-crowned sparrows can no longer learn the songs characteristic of their species; and how children learn to correct any errors they make, given the supposed absence of corrective reactions from adults.

The problem with many of these debates lies in the virtual absence of empirical findings and testable hypotheses. The premises have all too often been regarded as facts, and the arguments have raged from there on in. What are needed are testable hypotheses and analyses of pertinent data by the researchers making the claims. Ideally, their questions should yield answers from actual findings on acquisition. These debates, largely carried on in the pages of linguistics books and journals, have ranged over nature versus nurture, innateness (what's innate and "special" about human language) versus learning (what might be learnt, or not, from child-directed speech), and, more recently, the social versus cognitive properties of language as a tool for communication or a system for the representation of knowledge.

My own emphasis is on the social setting of acquisition combined with the cognitive foundations children can build on. So I view both social and cognitive development as critical to acquisition. Since it remains unclear how much of language is innate or whether any specialized learning mechanisms subserve it, my stance on this is a conservative one. I prefer to see how much one can account for on more general grounds first. The emphasis here is therefore on how (and how much) children can learn from adult usage, including specially tailored child-directed speech. I also look at evidence for early generalizations versus initially piecemeal acquisition of constructions with specific verbs and other lexical items. I place considerable emphasis on the developmental processes required in learning a language from the first words on and none on arguing that children know (nearly) everything from the start. As a result, I emphasize continuity in development – continuity in the meanings they express as they move from one word at a time to adultlike utterances for conveying their needs, their interests, their attitudes, and their thoughts.

### **The Plan of This Book**

Language is social. For language to work, speakers must ensure joint attention with their addressees and then make every effort to achieve and maintain common ground in each exchange. Its successful use depends on collaboration and cooperation among speakers. In this book, I start from that premise as I follow different themes through the process of acquisition. These themes include the roles of social and cognitive factors in language acquisition; the extent to which children learn different languages differently – how the course they follow is shaped by properties of each language; the increasing complexity of the expressions acquired with age; the stability children display in their order of acquisition for meanings and structures within a language; the role of common ground and the flow of information; the speaker's choice of perspective marked through words and constructions; and the importance of pragmatic factors in the acquisition and use of language, and what might constitute plausible mechanisms for acquisition.

Language is an elaborate resource for communication. It is complemented by various nonlinguistic resources – gesture, gaze, facial expression, bodily stance and orientation – that, together with language, make up the general repertoire people draw on to communicate. Language itself depends on a complex set of conventions on the meanings and uses of words and constructions. Without these conventions, speakers couldn't be sure that words, for instance, had the same meaning from one occasion to the next

or from one speaker to the next. So in learning a language, children need to learn both its conventions and how to apply them. The goal in acquisition is mastery of the language in use around them, so analyses of acquisition must be based on the language children hear. This *use-based approach* to acquisition takes actual usage as the target rather than any idealization of language. The words children hear and the constructions those words appear in are drawn from local patterns of usage in the speech community. The social setting where children are exposed to a first language is critical; this is where they hear their language used. This is the material they must learn to recognize, analyze, understand, and produce themselves.

To study acquisition, then, requires that we look at how children use language, what they have learnt about carrying on a conversation – for instance, taking turns, uttering different speech acts, taking account of what the addressee knows, and connecting new information to what has already been given. This approach encompasses both the acquisition of structure (forms and their meanings) and function (what forms can be used for and how they are deployed for each purpose). The same use-based approach must apply where children acquire more than one dialect or more than one language at a time: learning two (or more) at once, and when to use each, again depends on the usage within the community.

This book is divided into four parts. In the first (Chapters 2–6), I begin by looking at children’s conversations with adults and the information adults offer them about language use (Chapter 2). Next I turn to how children analyze the speech stream to recognize words (Chapter 3) and then review the content of children’s early words – the kinds of meanings they express – and how they learn to pronounce them (Chapters 4 and 5). I end with how children map meanings onto words (Chapter 6). The emphasis is on how children get started and their earliest uses of language.

In Part Two (Chapters 7–11), I focus on children’s acquisition of structure. They learn first to combine two or more words in a single utterance (Chapter 7) and modify each word with appropriate endings (Chapter 8). They add complexity to what they say in two ways: (a) by elaborating the information inside clauses (Chapter 9) and (b) by combining two or more clauses (Chapter 10). In each case, children advance from rudimentary expressions of meanings to more elaborate ones that use conventional adult forms. Lastly, I look at how children coin words when they don’t have any ready-made for the meanings they wish to convey (Chapter 11). The emphasis here is on how children acquire the adult forms for their meanings. With both constructions and coinages, they gradually build up more elaborate communicative options.

In Part Three, I turn to the social skills children need. They take part in conversations quite early, but learning what to say when is complicated, and getting the timing right for taking turns is hard (Chapter 12). On top of that, learning how to be polite, to be persuasive, to give instructions, or to tell stories all take added skill (Chapter 13). Finally, children have to decide how to talk – which dialect, or which language, to use. Their choices depend on the addressee, setting, and topic (Chapter 14). These social dimensions of language acquisition complement the structural ones. Children have to master both to become identified as speakers from a particular community.

In Part Four, I take up biological specialization for language and where in the brain language is processed (Chapter 15). I then review the kinds of mechanisms needed for the acquisition of a system as complex as language, demanding a wide range of skills for use (Chapter 16).

Throughout, I draw on data from a range of languages to underline both similarities in the analyses children do and differences in how speakers do things from one language to another, and, for both cases, the effects this can have on acquisition. I draw extensively on the diary study I kept of my son from birth to age six to illustrate some facets of language development described here. These observations are supplemented by other longitudinal records and by experimental data on the comprehension and production of specific constructions. I also draw extensively on other published findings and on data from the CHILDES Archive, a collection of transcripts from different researchers (MacWhinney & Snow 1985, 1990). Despite a plethora of studies since the 1960s, there are still many gaps in what we know about acquisition, even for well-studied languages, and there are still too few language-types included among those for which we do have data (Slobin 1985a, 1992, 1997). I hope the present overview will inspire readers to ask further questions, look at as-yet unstudied languages, and take up new questions about the many intriguing puzzles of acquisition.