

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- Chomsky’s observations: evidence from acquisition that language is an instinct
 - Children fully acquire language in 4-5 years, before mastering much “simpler” skills
 - Children require no overt instruction and are even impervious to correction
 - The input to children is highly “degenerate”—it is not systematically presented, it contains all kinds of linguistically irrelevant features (false starts, “uh’s”, etc.)

- How much language do we know before we know a language?
 - Month-old babies can distinguish syllables such as *ba* vs. *pa* (Pinker 266-267)
 - Four-day-old babies can distinguish the way different languages sound (Pinker 267-268)
 - “Pre-language” babies can distinguish vowels, even when spoken by different speakers (Kuhl experiment—see outline of film “The Mind: Language” following this lecture)
 - Children with no more than a two-word active vocabulary can distinguish between subject and object in spoken language (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff—see film outline; Pinker 272)

- Universal stages of language acquisition
 - **Babbling**—birth to about 1 year (Pinker 268-269): non-linguistic sounds → strings of repeated syllables → strings of varied syllables
 - **One-word stage**—about 1 to 1.5 years (Pinker 270): words fall primarily into four categories ...

Naming things	Actions/events	Modifiers	Social interaction
Mommy	give	dirty	no
Daddy	put	nice	yes
ball	sit	hot	hi
shoe	stop	more	bye-bye
car	go	this	want
juice	up	allgone	what-is-that
milk	down		

- **Two-word stage**—about 1.5 to 2.5 years (Pinker 270-272): utterances tend to fall into a basic set of meaning relations¹ ...

agent + action	<i>daddy kick</i>	(dad kicks ball)
action + affected	<i>throw stick</i>	(child throws stick)
agent + affected	<i>me ball</i>	(child kicks ball)
action + location	<i>sit chair</i>	(child sits on chair)
entity + location	<i>spoon table</i>	(spoon is on the table)
possessor + possession	<i>daddy coat</i>	(points to dad's coat)
entity + attribute	<i>kitty big</i>	(see tigers in zoo)
nomination	<i>that cake</i>	(that is a cake)
recurrence	<i>more ball</i>	(finds second ball)
negation	<i>no ball</i>	(has lost her ball)

- **Telegraphic speech to full grammar**—begins about 2 to 2.5 years (Pinker 273-275): some typical features of child grammar at earliest stages² ...

omission of certain unstressed words	<i>Out da kitchen.</i> <i>Nook'um pee.</i>	'Out in the kitchen.' 'Look at him pee.'
regularizing irregular forms	<i>Daddy dranked it.</i>	'Daddy drank it.'
regularizing syntax	<i>Cover up it.</i> <i>I don't want some more fish.</i>	'Cover it up.' (compare 'Cover up the dolly.) 'I don't want any more fish.' (responding to 'Do you want some more fish?')
pronoun use: "wrong" case; child's name instead of <i>i</i> , <i>me</i> ; confusion of 1st & 2nd person	<i>Where's me going?</i> <i>It's all of us's.</i> <i>Gretchen feed you that!</i>	'Where am I going?' 'It's all of ours.' 'I want to feed myself.' (her name as subject and <i>you</i> instead of <i>me</i> as object)

- The critical age (Pinker 295-301)

The Critical Age Hypothesis: There is a critical age, around the time of puberty, after which it is no longer possible (for most humans) to acquire a language with native-like proficiency.

- Few adults can acquire a second language without retaining an accent

"[Joseph] Conrad became a ship's master in the British merchant service ... and is one of the masters of English prose, [but] he always spoke English with a strong Marseillaise accent. ... Conrad's case is by no means unusual. The speech of Henry Kissinger is another example. Kissinger's English syntax is flawless; his accent is Germanic. In contrast, Kissinger's brother, who was a few years younger when the brothers came to the United States from Germany, has no accent. ... There is a critical period that limits the acquisition of a language without a

¹The table is from Jean Stilwell Peccei, *Child Language*, Routledge, 1994, p. 22.

²All the examples of child language in this in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from the speech of my daughter, Gretchen, when she was about 1 year 9 months to about 2 years.

foreign accent. The syntax and semantic structure of a language, in contrast, can usually be mastered by adults.” (P. Lieberman, *The Biology and Evolution of Language*, Harvard UP, 1984, p. 195)

- Someone deprived of language until after the critical age never acquires native-like proficiency
 - Pinker cites Genie (297) and Chelsea (297-298)

- Is there really a critical age?

Some second language theories believe factors such as motivation (how bad do you *really* want to learn that language you are taking to fulfill the language requirement?), linguistic needs (immigrant workers learn enough English to do their job but use their native language at home), and self-consciousness (“Oh-ma-God! I sound ridiculous when I make those sucky sounds!”) as explanations for why people beyond puberty do not master a language with native-like proficiency. However, such explanations would not explain the kinds of problems the Genie’s and Chelsea’s face, nor the fact that nearly *all* adults, including the most motivated and least inhibited, fail to attain native-like proficiency.

- Why is there are critical age?

[Pinker 299-300, gives a rather convoluted explanation, which may or may not be right. However, it seems to me that there is a more straightforward answer. Like all other organs, the brain matures. The proportionate sizes of the head, body, and limbs of a newborn are very different from those of an adult. The arms and legs, for example, grow much more than does the head. However, there comes a point when the limbs cease to grow longer in proportion to the rest of body growth, and moreover they lose the pliability that is characteristic of a young child’s limbs. Why would the brain not be similar? During the period between birth and puberty, the brain is moving toward its adult “shape” and away from the plasticity of the newborn’s brain. The average 20-year old can no more suck his/her toes with ease than s/he can acquire a second language!—RGS]