

Discussion Questions for Language Acquisition

1. Here are some child utterances with contexts and adult English translations (data from Jean Stilwell Peccei, *Child Language*, London:Routledge, 1994). Analyze each child utterance considering at least

- the stage of acquisition (from page 89 above) that the child has reached,
- the types or categories of words the child is using (and possible differences from the categories the words belong to in adult speech),
- the types or categories of words the child is NOT using,
- the structure and/or meaning relations between the words.

a.	Car! (pushing toy car)	'I'm making the car go!'	Stage: one-word Categories: name or event? Structure: object of action
b.	Ball! (ball is rolling toward child)	'That's a ball!'	Stage: one-word Categories: name Structure: identification
c.	Ball! (reaching for a ball on a high shelf)	'I want the ball!'	Stage: one-word Categories: name Structure: object of action
d.	Car go! (pushing toy car)	'I'm making the car go!'	Stage: two-word Categories: name, event Structure: agent + action
e.	More cookie! (having finished last cookie)	'I want another cookie!'	Stage: two-word Categories: quantifier, noun Structure: recurrence
f.	More butterfly! (watching butterfly, 2nd butterfly appears)	'There's another butterfly!'	Stage: two-word Categories: quantifier, noun Structure: recurrence
g.	Teddy floor. He sad. (stuffed animal is on the floor)	'Teddy is on the floor. He is sad.'	Stage: two-word or telegraphic* Categories: name, pronoun, modifier Structure: entity + location; entity + attribute
h.	Our play that on floor.	'We will play that on the floor.'	Stage: telegraphic Categories: essentially like adult except for <u>omission</u> of article ("the floor"), tense marker ("will"), and wrong pronoun choice ("our" instead of "we") Structure: S -> NP VP VP -> V NP PP
i.	I want drink it out can.	'I want to drink it out of the can.'	Stage: telegraphic Categories: essentially adult but omits grammatical function words ("to drink", "out of the can") Structure: S -> NP VP VP -> V VP VP -> V N PP

*It is hard to tell whether, "Teddy floor. He sad," is **two-word** or **telegraphic**. The utterance looks like 2 two-word sentences--the two-word stage--but how do the sentences differ from adult speech? The verb 'be', a preposition, and a definite article are missing, i.e. "Teddy floor" = "Teddy is on the floor." These are the kinds of words typically omitted at the telegraphic stage.

EXAMPLES IN THE QUESTIONS BELOW ARE FROM THE SPEECH OF MY DAUGHTER, GRETCHEN, WHEN SHE WAS BETWEEN 2 AND 3 YEARS OLD.



2. Here are some verb forms that Gretchen used with their pronunciations. Explain her pronunciation.

- a. I don't know what it says [sez].
- b. I heard [hird] it.

- **[sez]:** The normal process for 3rd person singular agreement is "add -s to the verb root" (pronounced [z] if the verb ends in a voiced sound). Gretchen generalizes this process to the verb 'say', which is irregular in its pronunciation, i.e. [sEz].
- **[hird]:** The normal process for regular past tense is "add -ed to the verb root" (pronounced [d] if the verb ends in a voiced sound). Gretchen generalizes this process to the verb 'hear', which is irregular in its pronunciation, i.e. [hɪrd], with the vowel of the root being just a "syllabic -r-".

3. Here are some *tag questions* Gretchen used. The rules for forming tag questions in English are essentially as follows:

- (1a) if there is an auxiliary verb (*is, have, could, will, etc.*) in the sentence, repeat the auxiliary and subject in inverted order (he is tall -> is he tall? I will win -> will I win?);
- (1b) if there is no auxiliary verb, use the appropriate form of *do* as the verb in the tag (he sings -> does he sing? I won -> did I win?);
- (2) if the sentence is positive, make the tag negative, if the sentence is negative, make the tag positive (He is tall, isn't he? I won, didn't I? I won't win, will I? He didn't sing, did he?).

Referring to these rules and Gretchen's deviation from them, try explain what mental rules *she* must have formed to come up with her tags.

<p>i. She makes funny sounds, <u>don't she?</u></p>	<p>Generalization of the tag don't: This would be the tag for MOST persons when the sentence didn't have an auxiliary verb (1b) and the sentence was positive (2). For 3rd person <u>singular</u> like 'she', the tag would be doesn't, but Gretchen extends the more frequent don't as if it were a sort of invariable form.</p>
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ii.	She was laying on the bed, <u>didn't she?</u>	<u>Generalization of the tag with do:</u> This sentence has an auxiliary verb 'was', which should be repeated in the tag (1a), i.e. wasn't she? Gretchen has extended the "do" form (1b) to all sentences, regardless of whether they have an auxiliary verb or not.
iii.	I'm getting' ready to go outside, <u>an't I?</u>	<u>Generalization of the auxiliary verb form:</u> Normally the auxiliary verb form in the sentence is just repeated in the tag (... <u>was</u> ... -> wasn't he?, ... <u>are</u> ... -> aren't you?, etc.). Gretchen has extended this general process to am , i.e. 'I <u>am</u> , <u>an't</u> I?', but it turns out that in first person singular, the adult form uses are , i.e. 'I <u>am</u> , <u>aren't</u> I!'.

4. The film and lecture talked about how children *generalize* the meaning of a word to things adults would not use the word for, e.g. “doggy” referring to any animal. Children sometimes follow another path in coming up with words for a situation. This is exemplified in the following sentences by Gretchen. Explain these items.

- a. Booker T. Washing Machine
- b. walnut shelf [shell]
- c. King of Spain's water [daughter]
- d. ... 7, 8 lay them straight; 9, 10, a good fat hen; 11, 12, dig and delve; fortress, fortress ...

Examples like these correspond to a phenomenon called **FOLK ETYMOLOGY** when adults do it: you hear a new or unfamiliar term, and you "assume" that it is composed of familiar elements; you then say the word using these elements instead of the original pronunciation. Examples that exist in English are

cockroach: from Spanish *cucaracha*, "folk-etymologized" in English by combining English words "cock" + "roach"

crayfish: from French *crévisse*, "folk-etymologized" in English by combining English words "cray" (whatever that may mean!) + "fish"

Gretchen has done the same thing, using words she already knew as substitutes for words which she did not know, or at least did not control.

- "Booker T. Washington" becomes "Booker T. Washing Machine"
- "walnut shell" becomes "walnut shelf"
- "King of Spain's daughter" becomes "King of Spain's water" "...dig and delve, thirteen, fourteen" becomes "...dig and delve, fortress, fortress"

5. English (at least American English) has rather complex rules for the pronunciation of /t/ and /d/ between vowels. If these sounds are between vowels and the stressed syllable precedes them, they become a “flap” (sort of like the sound written as one “r” in Spanish, symbolized with capital “D” here), e.g. *powder* [pawDr], *beauty* [byuDi]. However, if /t/ is followed by unstressed vowel + n, it is pronounced as glottal stop (symbolized by “ʔ” here), e.g. *button* [bʌʔn]. Here is the way Gretchen pronounced some words with /t/ and /d/ between vowels at different ages. See if you can figure out what she was doing. (Raised “h” represents aspiration, normally heard after a voiceless sound at the beginning of a word or *before* a stressed syllable.)

2 years, 6 months		2 years, 10 months	
[pawt ^h r]	'powder'	[bʌDʌn]	'button'
[byut ^h i]	'beauty'	[iDŋ]	'eating'

<p>2 years, 6 months</p>	<p>Gretchen was using aspirated [t^h] between vowels for both adult / d / and / t /. She apparently had formed a mental association between the [t] pronunciation of "t" at the beginning of a word and the [D] pronunciation of "t" between vowels. In the "Gretchen version of English" at this time, she simply used the same pronunciation of "t" everywhere instead of following the adult pattern of "flapping" between vowels. But she even carried things a step further: she used the [t^h] for ALL adult [D]'s, including those which adults associate with / d /, as in 'powder'.</p>
<p>2 years, 10 months</p>	<p>At this point, the "Gretchen version of English pronunciation" was moving closer to that of adults--she was pronouncing [D] for / t / between vowels as in 'eating'. But she carried her flapping process a step further than adults: she pronounced / t / as [D] even when the next consonant was / n /, as in 'button', even though here adults use glottal stop (see adult pronunciation above).</p>

6. Gretchen at this stage had some problems with getting the correct reference for pronouns, including *reflexive* pronouns, i.e. those ending in *-self*:

I'm washing yourself. [meaning 'I'm washing myself.']

Though Gretchen had yet to work out the use of reflexives, she never produced utterances like

*Myself/yourself is washing me.

Why not?

Like every child acquiring language, Gretchen conformed to certain universal properties of language grammar that seem to be part of human cognitive make up. One such set of properties has to do with the way languages use **reflexive pronouns**, i.e. pronouns like those ending in *-self* in English which refer to an actor acting on him-/her-/itself. When examined in detail, the facts get complex and the theoretical linguistic points get technical, but roughly speaking,

"Languages do not allow a reflexive to precede its referent."

In Gretchen's sentence, "I'm washing yourself," the referent is **I** and the reflexive is **yourself**. Her use of "yourself" to refer to "I" does not follow the adult agreement pattern, but it **DOES** conform to the universal pattern of having the reflexive **come after** its referent.

7. Here are some errors made by non-native speakers of English. For each error or set of errors, state whether it is more likely to be an INTERFERENCE error or an OVERGENERALIZATION.

<p>a. He did not <u>agreed</u>. The man does not <u>cares</u> for his life.</p>	<p>Overgeneralization: The speaker has added a past tense ending -d in the first and a presente tense ending -s in the second. However, if there is an auxiliary do in a sentence, English marks tense on the auxiliary, not the verb. This has to be <u>overgeneralization</u> because it involves extending the specific <u>English</u> tense markers to both do and the main verb. The markers themselves as well as the rules for marking tense are specific to English, and hence would not be interference from the speaker's native language.</p>
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b.	He entered <u>in</u> the room. What is the time <u>in</u> your watch.	(Probably) Interference: The speaker's native language probably used the preposition meaning "in" with the verb 'enter' (typical of many languages) and also to refer to time as shown on a watch. There is nothing within English to suggest these uses of the preposition 'in'.
c.	She goes to <u>bazaar</u> every day. (<i>the</i> omitted before <i>bazaar</i>) He was <u>good boy</u> . (<i>a</i> omitted before <i>good boy</i>)	Interference: A major task facing anyone learning English is how to use the articles. Many languages (probably including the language of this speaker) do not even have a category articles, leading to a tendency to omit them.
d.	I can't <u>drive</u> the bicycle fast. (meant <i>ride</i>) I need my hair to be <u>tall</u> . (meant <i>long</i>) I hope to become <u>bigger</u> than this age. (meant <i>older</i>)	(Probably) interference: These sound like cases where the speaker's language uses the same word to mean 'drive (a car)' and 'ride (a bicycle)' (maybe a more accurate translation of that word in English would be "pilot or guide a machine"). The same goes for the other words. On the other hand, these could conceivably involve overgeneralization if the speaker didn't know the words 'ride', 'long', 'old' and picked a word they already knew in English which seemed to be related in meaning.

e. Pronunciations of some English words by speakers of two different dialects of Arabic:

'floor'	filōr	iflōr
'three'	θirī	iθrī
'Fred'	fired	ifred
'children'	čildiren	čilidren

Interference: Non-native pronunciation is virtually always a result of interference from the pronunciation habits of the native language. Arabic has no words with two consonants at the beginning of the word, so these speakers are either adding a vowel between the two consonants or before the first in order to put the two consonants in a row in the middle of the word, a situation which Arabic DOES have.