COURSE DESCRIPTION

Overview

This course examines the nature of children’s early linguistic representations, especially in the domains of morphology and syntax. It asks such questions as: what is the nature of the child’s initial state and is it continuous with the adult state?; what type of grammar best characterizes the mature state?; what do the states in between the initial state and the final state look like?; are deficits in comprehension and production deficits in the child’s representations or deficits in the child’s ability to access representations (competence vs performance)? In the course of asking questions about representations, we will also examine the role of input and the methods researchers use to answer questions about representations. We will focus on the beginning of acquisition – when the child is around two years old.

The course will examine two broad views of acquisition. In one, a perspective influenced by generative grammar, the child begins with innate abstract specifications of syntactic features and the form of the grammar; the child must learn language-specific details. In the other view, a perspective more influenced by empiricism, the child begins with no innate syntax but observes lexically-specific details in the input and builds abstractions over time.

Classes will adopt a seminar format. Students will read original theoretical, empirical, and computational articles. For each class, I will assign one article; you will choose two additional articles to read for each class. You may choose those articles from the readings in the syllabus, from references in the assigned reading, or from citations to the assigned reading. Be prepared to discuss “your” articles in class.

Over the course of the semester, students will
a) perform some data analysis or data design
b) write a 5-10 page midterm paper (a critical review of a recent journal article)
c) make one 15-min class presentation
d) write a final paper or take a final examination

I encourage you to think of your final paper as preparation for a qualifying paper or as the basis for a paper to submit to a conference. All of the assignments can have the same focus. In the ideal case, each assignment will feed into the next so that the final paper will benefit from the earlier work.

An important goal of the course is to help students think like researchers in language acquisition and, where relevant, to consider the applied implications of basic research findings. By
transcribing and) analyzing child data, critiquing published work, and developing research plans, students can learn how to ask and answer questions in language acquisition.

6 course objectives; in this course you will:
- Acquire a grounding in the basic issues and controversies in language acquisition
- Develop skills for analyzing children's spontaneous language
- Learn the basic experimental procedures for testing children's linguistic knowledge
- Learn how to analyze research papers
- Design a study, resolve a theoretical disagreement, or demonstrate your knowledge of acquisition via a final exam
- Practice organizing and delivering a talk with peers

By the end of the course, you should be able to:
- Articulate the current controversies in the field of syntax acquisition and relate those controversies to broader issues in speech science, linguistics, psychology, and philosophy
- Understand the components of good methods in language acquisition research
- Critique primary experimental and theoretical articles in language acquisition
- Develop a research question in language acquisition and outline a line of approach
- Demonstrate a knowledge of key theoretical claims about children's knowledge of language and mechanisms of language acquisition

There are numerous conferences which students can submit abstracts to, or simply attend. Conferences help you get an up-to-date picture of what problems people are working on. A small conference is a good place to start. Several conferences are student-run.

- **Boston University Conference on Language Development (BUCLD);** almost always the first weekend in November; usually a 1-15 May abstract deadline; Boston
  - 2022: expected 3-6 November
  - 2023: expected 2-5 November
- **Linguistic Society of America (LSA);** almost always the first few days of January; usually a late June abstract deadline for individual talks and posters, usually a mid-May proposal deadline for Organized Sessions; different cities
  - 2023: 5-8 January, Denver
  - 2024: 4-7 January, New York
- **Penn Linguistics Conference (PLC);** usually in spring; student-run; usually a November abstract deadline; Philadelphia
  - 2022: 18-20 March; virtual
  - 2023: no information currently available
- **Arizona Linguistics Circle Conference;** usually in October; student-run; usually a July abstract deadline; Tucson
  - 2022: no information currently available
- **Chicago Linguistics Society (CLS);** usually in spring; student-run; usually a January abstract deadline; Chicago
  - 2022: 22-24 April
  - 2023: no information currently available
- **International Association for the Study of Child Language (IASCL);** usually in July; different cities
  - 2023? 2024?: no information currently available
- **Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition (GALA);** biennial, usually in fall; different cities
  - 2022: 22-24 September, Goethe University, Frankfurt
• *Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA)*; usually in spring; different cities
  - 2022? 2023?: no information currently available

• *Architectures and Mechanisms for Language Processing (AMLaP)*; usually in September; different cities
  - 2022? 2023?: no information currently available

• *Symposium on Bilingualism (ISB)*; usually in July, every other year; different cities
  - 2023: no information currently available

• *Cognitive Science Society (CogSci)*; usually in July or August; usually a Jan-Feb abstract deadline; different cities
  - 2022: 25 July – 1 August, Toronto
  - 2023: ?

You must turn in all work on time or early! Any late assignment will automatically receive a zero. Documented emergencies are, of course, an exception. Be sure to call or email first if you anticipate any difficulties.

Document all sources properly in any work that you hand in. Report findings honestly, whether or not they support your or anyone else's views. If you are not sure what constitutes plagiarism or fraud, be sure to ask. Students can find themselves plagiarizing unintentionally; unfortunately, that still counts as plagiarism. A short document on avoiding plagiarism is available on Bb, along with sources to other information.

Bb will be used for this course. Make sure that your CUNY email address is registered at Bb, since Bb may not accept non-CUNY addresses. If you do not typically use your CUNY address, make sure that your CUNY email is forwarded automatically to your usual email address. There may be periodic updates to readings or assignments.

The syllabus, the course description, the assignments, and readings that are not easily available will be posted on Bb. Journal articles are generally available through the GC library's on-line sources. Some book chapters are available through the library's ecollection. If I have not posted a reading on Bb, it should be available online or through the library.

Please feel free to use the various utilities that Bb makes available, such as discussion among students and queries about the readings.

**Description of assignments and final**

In order to understand researchers' claims, it is very helpful to have hands-on experience in analyzing transcripts and calculating MLU. It is also very helpful to transcribe child speech, and you may do that for extra credit. It is also helpful to learn how to evaluate the articles that you read and how to present your ideas.

1) **MLU calculation** of 100 child utterances is in principle easy to do. This will be an in-class exercise. The main problem that students have in calculating MLU is deciding what counts as an utterance. An utterance is a child stretch of speech that has not been interrupted and which has no unintelligible portions. Students will calculate 3 sets of MLUs in class. A document on how to calculate MLU will be available.

2) The **journal article review** (20 points) is designed to help you think like a reviewer, by having you critically analyze a recent (ideally, published no earlier than 2015) journal article. The review will be approximately 5-10 double-spaced pages with 12-point type (Times New Roman preferred) and 1-inch margins. You might think that published papers have already been so well-reviewed that their methods and
conclusions are beyond reproach. By reading an article in depth, you will discover that that is not necessarily the case. Try to choose an article that stimulates your thinking and could be the basis for designing a new study or developing a new analysis. Please clear your choice of article with me. Feel free to collaborate on the review, and to write a joint review in which you detail each person's contribution. If that seems difficult, submit individual papers instead. Please submit papers electronically to Bb, no later than 15 minutes before the class in which they are due. I do not accept late work except in the case of documented emergencies.

3) Transcript or corpus analysis or study design (20 points) will be described at greater length in class. If you choose corpus analysis, analyze at least one corpus to investigate developmental phenomena. Possibilities include, but are not limited to, subjects, root infinitives, the relation between subjects and verb inflections, wh-questions, yes-no questions. Write a description of your findings. The write-up will be 5-10 double-spaced pages with 12-point type (Times New Roman preferred) and 1-inch margins. You are strongly encouraged to collaborate on the analysis; if you wish, you may write a joint analysis in which you detail each person's contribution. If that seems difficult, submit individual papers instead. The analysis may be inspired by previous work but should be original. Transcript sources include the CHILDES database and databases of second language learners. If you do not yet have polished skills at corpus analysis, write up the design of a study that will investigate a phenomenon like those mentioned earlier. I do not accept late work except in the case of documented emergencies.

4) The class presentation (20 points) will be 15 minutes in length and will simulate a conference presentation. You have a wide range of options on topic but please clear your choice with me. In the ideal case, you will develop your transcript analysis, your journal article review, or an idea from class readings into a presentation. Possibilities include (but are not limited to) suggesting a new study (either theoretical or empirical), presenting a critique of current research on a controversial issue, or suggesting a competing analysis of a phenomena. You may collaborate with at least one other person. Up to 4 students may collaborate but the presentation cannot be longer than 15 min. This assignment gives you practice in presenting material to your peers in a way that is informative and interesting.

5) The final requirement (40 points) is a final paper, submitted electronically no later than one week after the last class. The paper will be 15-20 double-spaced pages with 12-point type (Times New Roman preferred) and 1-inch margins. In the ideal case, you will build from your transcript analysis or study design, class readings, journal article review, presentation, or some combination of the above. Please clear your topic and approach with me. I do not accept late work except in the case of documented emergencies.
Tentative Assignment Overview: 01 February 2022 to 24 May 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Due</th>
<th>Class Due</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 February</td>
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<td>MLU calculation</td>
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<tr>
<td>08 March, 4:15 p.m.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>journal article review</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 March, 4:15 p.m.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>transcript analysis or study design</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>03 and 10 May, 4:15 p.m.</td>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>class presentations</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>24 May, 4:15 p.m.</td>
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<td>final paper (or exam)</td>
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Tentative Calendar 1: 01 February 2022 – 29 March 2022

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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 February</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>08 and 15 February</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Functional categories, morphology, grammar</td>
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<td>22 February and 1 March</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Syntactic priming</td>
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<tr>
<td>08 March</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Typical input: positive evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 March</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Atypical input</td>
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<td>22 and 29 March</td>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>Null subjects</td>
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