- **L1 acquisition of morphology**

Background reading:

- *CL* Ch 9, sec 4

1. Review — L1 acquisition key ideas

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  → L1 (first-language) acquisition is different from learning a skill (more on this next Monday)

- Why is child language acquisition much more connected to **descriptive grammar / mental grammar** than it is to prescriptive grammar?

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- Why do linguists use the term ***acquisition*** rather than ***learning*** for children's language development?

  → L1 (first-language) acquisition is different from learning a skill (more on this next Monday)

- Why is child language acquisition much more connected to **descriptive grammar / mental grammar** than it is to prescriptive grammar?

  → L1 acquisition is about how a child's mental grammar uses the language data in the environment to develop a language system

1. Review — L1 acquisition key ideas

- A child who is in the process of acquiring his/her target (adult) language goes through different **stages** of development
  - These stages reflect **intermediate mental grammars** on the way to the adult grammar
- A child often shows **variable** behavior
  - A rule may be applied only some of the time
  - Multiple versions of a rule may be in use
- But we can still find a great deal of **systematicity** in children's language behavior

2. Morphological development: Overview

- Two strong sources of evidence that children are constructing a mental grammar as they acquire their language come from morphology:
  - **overgeneralization**

    (also known as overregularization)

  - **productive use of morphology** (*wug*-tests)

3. Overgeneralization

- Here is a common pattern in children at three different stages of development (younger→older):

Stage 1			
show	*showed*	*go*	*went*
Stage 2			
show	*showed*	*go*	***goed***
Stage 3			
show	*showed*	*go*	*went*

  - What happened? Why did the child's language ability seem to "go backward"?

3. Overgeneralization

- Does a child hear forms like *goed* (or *mans*, or *bringed*) in the adult speech community? No!
  - Why does the child produce such forms, often *after* a stage with the correct forms?

3. Overgeneralization

- Why does the child produce such forms, often *after* a stage with the correct forms?
- This is **evidence** for **morphological rules**
  - At first, the child stores each form (present/past, singular/plural) **separately** in the lexicon
  - Then, the child learns a **morphological rule**,
  - We know this because the child sometimes applies it even to forms that are irregular (and are lexically listed as exceptions to that rule in the adult grammar) | this is called **overgeneralization**

3. Overgeneralization

- How we analyze what the child is doing

Stage 1			
show lexically listed	*showed* lexically listed	*go* lexically listed	*went* lexically listed
Stage 2			
show lexically listed	*showed* formed by rule	*go* lexically listed	***goed*** formed by rule
Stage 3			
show lexically listed	*showed* formed by rule	*go* lexically listed	*went* lexically listed

  - The past-tense word-formation rule is (temporarily) **overgeneralized** to the root /gow/

4. Productive use of morphology

- Children perform quite well at tasks like these:
  -  *This is a wug. Now there is another one. There are two of them! There are two ___.*
  - *What would we call someone who crushes things? Someone who crushes things is a ___.*
- Children can create morphological forms they have never heard before, using familiar or "new" words
  - What does this show us about a child's developing mental grammar?

4. Productive use of morphology

- Children perform quite well at tasks like these:
  -  *This is a wug. Now there is another one. There are two of them! There are two ___.*
  - *What would we call someone who crushes things? Someone who crushes things is a ___.*
- Children who can complete these tasks have the relevant inflectional and derivational **morphological rules** in their mental grammar
- See the original wug-test article (very accessible):

  Berko [Gleason], Jean. 1958. The child's learning of English morphology. *Word* 14: 150-177. [PDF file]

5. Content and function morphemes

A useful distinction in morphology (and syntax):

- **Content** morphemes (also called *lexical* morphemes) have **real-world meaning**
  - N, V, A
  - Derivational affixes
- **Function** morphemes (also called *nonlexical* or *grammatical* morphemes) have **grammar**-related meaning
  - Det, P, auxiliary verbs, …
  - Inflectional affixes

5. Content and function morphemes

- The first morphemes acquired are typically **content** morphemes

- **Function** morphemes often have a typical developmental sequence in a given language
  - Why?
    Where does this sequence come from?

5. Content and function morphemes

- Function morphemes: Typical **developmental sequence**

1. *-ing*
2. plural *-s*
3. possessive *'s*
4. *the, a*
5. past tense *-ed*
6. 3rd person singular *-s*
7. auxiliary *be*

(*CL*, Table 9.12, p 365)

- Compare: Typical relative **frequency** in **parent speech**

1. *the, a*
2. *-ing*
3. plural *-s*
4. auxiliary *be*
5. possessive *'s*
6. 3rd person singular *-s*
7. past tense *-ed*

(*CL*, Table 9.13, p 366)

- Does frequency in parent speech *predict* acquisition order?

5. Content and function morphemes

- Frequency of function morphemes in adult speech **does not** predict how early they will be acquired!

  → It's not just learning what you hear the most…

- What factors *do* seem to predict early acquisition?
  - Occurs frequently at the end of the utterance
  - Forms a syllable on its own
  - Not a homophone
  - Behavior is regular — it has few exceptions
  - Allomorphic invariance (one sound shape)
  - Has a clearly discernable semantic function