• Some factors that do not explain L1 acquisition

Background reading:

• CL Ch 9, sec 6.1–6.3
1. Review — L1 acquisition key ideas

• 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
2. What makes L1 acquisition possible?

Now we will consider:

• What role do the following types of **parent/child interaction** play in a child’s language development?
  - Imitation
  - Feedback / “correction” by adults
  - Caregiver speech (“motherese”)

• What is the role of **general cognitive development** in L1 acquisition?

→ We conclude that none of these are a general explanation for L1 acquisition
3. Acquisition is not just imitation

- Some people assume that children simply learn language by *imitating* adult speakers
  - Sometimes a child can imitate more accurately than they generally speak

- However, imitation is far from the only process involved in language acquisition
  - What characteristics of language are *incompatible* with the imitation hypothesis?
  - What often happens when a child is explicitly *encouraged* to imitate?
3. Acquisition is not just imitation

- What characteristics of language are incompatible with the imitation hypothesis? Why?
  - Creativity/productivity of language

- Morphological overgeneralization and other child-specific linguistic rules
3. Acquisition is not just imitation

- What characteristics of language are incompatible with the imitation hypothesis? Why?
  - Creativity/productivity of language
    - How can a child be “imitating” if producing something they have never heard?

- Morphological overgeneralization and other child-specific linguistic rules
  - goed, brought: What would the child be “imitating”?
3. Acquisition is not just imitation

• **What often happens** when child **asked** to imitate?
  
  Parent: *Why can’t kitty stand up?*
  Child: *Why kitty can’t stand up?*  
  
  *(CL, p 378)*
3. Acquisition is not just imitation

- **What often happens** when child **asked** to imitate?
  
  Parent: *Why can’t kitty stand up?*
  
  Child: *Why kitty can’t stand up?*  
  
  (CL, p 378)

- A child is often **unable to imitate** linguistic structures that their mental grammar isn’t yet ready for
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

- Some people assume that parents teach language to children by **correcting their errors**
  - Do children learn from **direct correction** by caregivers?
  - Do children learn from **recasts** (repeating child’s utterance with readjustment)?
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

- Children often “ignore” (or, their mental grammars can’t interpret) **direct correction**

  *Child:* Want other one spoon, Daddy.  
  *Father:* You mean, you want the other spoon.  
  *Child:* Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.  
  *Father:* Can you say “the other spoon”?  
  *Child:* other...one...spoon.  
  *Father:* Say “other.”  
  *Child:* other.  
  *Father:* “spoon.”  
  *Child:* spoon.  
  *Father:* “other spoon.”  
  *Child:* other...spoon. Now give me other one spoon?
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

- When are **recasts** used? Do they help identify non-adult-like utterances?
  
  - Child: *Mama isn’t boy; he’s a girl!*
  
  - Parent: *That’s right.*
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

- When are **recasts** used? Do they help identify non-adult-like utterances?
  
  - In this example, the parent is responding to the **content** of the child’s utterance, not the linguistic **structure**

  - Parents don’t reliably give children cues that their utterances are not consistent with the target adult grammar

  i. Child: *Mama isn’t boy; he’s a girl!*

  Parent: *That’s right.*
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

• When are **recasts** used? Do they help identify non-adult-like utterances?

  ii. Child:  *Boy chasing dog.*
  
  Parent:  *Yes, the boy is chasing the dog.*

  iii. Child:  *The dog is barking.*
  
  Parent:  *Yes, the dog is barking at the kitty.*
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

• When are **recasts** used? Do they help identify non-adult-like utterances?
  
  **ii.** Child: *Boy chasing dog.*
  
  Parent: *Yes, the boy is chasing the dog.*

  **iii.** Child: *The dog is barking.*
  
  Parent: *Yes, the dog is barking at the kitty.*

  - The response in (ii) is an actual correction
  - The response in (iii) is just adding information
  - Would a child be able to tell the difference?
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

- When parents “correct” their children, it’s more likely to be about the **truth** of their utterances than phonology/morphology/syntax

- Even recasts do **not** always serve as a cue for non-adult-like utterances
  - Sometimes they just expand an utterance with additional, optional information
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

• BUT! Is there a link between recasts and acquisition? Two experiments:
  - No? → Recasts had no effect in a study of the acquisition of determiners *a*, *the*
  - Yes? → A single recast was often enough to permit learning the irregular past tense of a novel (made-up) verb

• Is there a principled difference between these two examples of recasts that might explain the different results?
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

- Is there a **principled difference** between these two examples of recasts that might explain the different results?
  - Learning when/where to use determiners is mostly a matter for the...
  - Learning the irregular past tense of a new verb is mostly a matter for the...
4. Acquisition is not just parental feedback

• Is there a **principled difference** between these two examples of recasts that might explain the different results?
  - Learning when/where to use determiners is mostly a matter for the **mental grammar**
    • A system of rules must be developed
  - Learning the irregular past tense of a new verb is mostly a matter for the **lexicon**
    • Unpredictable information needs to be memorized and stored
5. A role for caregiver speech?

• In many (not all!) cultures, adults use a special speech style with young children, known as **caregiver speech** (also called **infant-directed/child-directed speech**, “motherese”)

• Some characteristics of caregiver speech by middle-class English-speaking caregivers (see Table 9.22 on p 377 of CL for more)
  - slower speech
  - tendency to refer to “the here and now”

• How might these aspects of caregiver speech be helpful in acquisition?
5. A role for caregiver speech?

• How might these aspects of caregiver speech be helpful in acquisition?
  - Slower speech → phonological acquisition?
  - Tendency to refer to “the here and now” → semantic acquisition?

• But, many aspects of caregiver speech do not seem to affect acquisition
  - We saw earlier that relative frequency of grammatical morphemes (inflectional affixes and function words) does not predict acquisition order
6. Acquisition is not just cognitive development

• Another factor that does not fully explain L1 acquisition is **general cognitive development**

• There are some possible correlations

• But: Evidence that language and cognitive development are at least partly **independent**
  - Language can be intact while cognition is impaired
  - Cognitive function can be normal while mental grammar is impaired
7. So...What makes L1 acquisition possible?

• None of these influences can account for L1 acquisition:
  - Imitation
  - Feedback / “correction” by adults
  - Caregiver speech
  - General cognitive development

• Next time, we will consider evidence for a critical period in L1 acquisition: Language acquisition as a biological, instinctual process?