

- **Some factors that do not explain L1 acquisition**

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*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, bringed*: 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. (CL, pp 378-379)

*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?
  - i. Child: *Mama isn't boy; he's a girl!*  
Parent: *That's right.*

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- When are **recasts** used? Do they help identify non-adult-like utterances?
  - i. Child: *Mama isn't boy; he's a girl!*  
Parent: *That's right.*
  - 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

## 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.*

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- 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?