

Discussion Questions for Chapter 1: Language learning in early childhood

- 1 Child language acquisition researchers have found that children across many cultures tend to have similar kinds of words in the 'first fifty'. What do you think might be some typical first-learned words? Why do you think are these among the first words children learn?
- 2 Think of three or four 'telegraphic' sentences that a young child might produce. These may be in English or another language you know well. How are these 'little sentences' similar to those in the adult language? How are they different?
- 3 Researchers have used both longitudinal and cross-sectional approaches to investigate the order of acquisition of *grammatical morphemes* in English by young children. Describe these approaches in your own words. What are the challenges and the potential benefits of each?
- 4 Summarize the findings from the Brown and de Villiers' studies with respect to both *rate* and *order* of acquisition of grammatical morphemes by English L1 children.
- 5 What is the 'wug test'? What do the findings from the wug test tell us about children's developing language? What advantages does the wug test have over studies that observe children's language in natural settings? Can you think of some disadvantages?
- 6 What is *metalinguistic awareness*? Why is it a prerequisite for being able to understand most jokes and riddles? Think of a joke or riddle you know. How is metalinguistic awareness related to your understanding of what makes this joke funny?
- 7 What aspects of language knowledge and skill are developed during the early school years? What experiences promote this development?
- 8 What have researchers observed about the frequency with which young children engage in imitation and repetitive practice? In what way are young children's linguistic imitation and practice patterns different from those of some foreign language classes?
- 9 Give examples of both grammatical and lexical overgeneralization errors found in early child language. What is the general learning principle that underlies such errors?

- 11 What is the ‘logical problem of language acquisition’? How does ‘UG’ address this problem?
- 12 How do the stories of Victor and Genie (pages 22–23) support the *critical period hypothesis*? Do you find this evidence convincing? Why do most researchers consider that the evidence from users of American Sign Language that was collected by Newport and her colleagues (pages 23–24) is stronger support for the CPH?
- 13 How are Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s views of first language acquisition similar? How do they differ?
- 14 What are the main features of child-directed speech, and why is it of interest to language acquisition researchers? Why should we be cautious in generalizing the findings of the North American research in this area to the acquisition of all L1s?
- 15 What was unusual about Jim’s exposure to language? How does this case support an interactionist perspective on language acquisition?
- 16 What explanation for language acquisition do connectionists propose? How does it contrast with the Chomskyan, innatist view? What similarities and differences do you see between the way computers and human brains learn?
- 17 What is your definition of ‘bilingual’? Do you think that different people have different definitions? Why might this be so?
- 18 Explain the difference between *simultaneous* and *sequential* bilingualism, then between *additive* and *subtractive* bilingualism. Are subtractive bilinguals really bilingual?
- 20 Imagine a conversation with a frustrated teacher talking about a second language learner who is doing very poorly in his science class. The teacher says that the problem can’t be a ‘language problem’ because the student ‘speaks English all the time with his friends’. Could you help the teacher understand what might be going on here?
- 21 Among the theoretical perspectives that have been proposed to explain L1 acquisition are:
 - The behaviourist perspective
 - The innatist perspective
 - The interactionist perspective
 - The Vygotskyan sociocultural perspective
 - Usage-based perspectives

Comment on the importance of the following factors in each of the perspectives:

- Language-specific mental structures
- Imitation and habit formation
- The use by caregivers of adapted or simplified language
- Positive reinforcement and/or corrective feedback (on language features)
- Developmental sequences for language features
- General cognitive processing
- Conversational interaction with others
- Frequency and salience of language features in the input
- The hypothesis that there is a critical period for language acquisition.