Today

- How do children acquire language?
- Innateness
- Critical period

Reading: 9.3
Language acquisition

- How do children learn language?
Imitation?

Observation: Children of French-speaking parents speak French

Conclusion: Children must learn language by imitating their parents

BUT…
Sometimes language is not imitated

- **Child:** My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.
- **Adult:** Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?
- **Child:** Yes.
- **Adult:** What did you say she did?
- **Child:** She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.
- **Adult:** Did you say she held them tightly?
- **Child:** No, she holded them loosely.

Conclusion: Child has learned the English regular past tense rule. But her grammar does not admit exceptions to this rule (irregular verbs)

Source: CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System). B MacWhinney & C. Snow ()
Sometimes language is not imitated

- Children say things parents never say
  - Phonological: [fIz] ‘fish’, [gagi] ‘doggie’
  - Morphological: goed, runned, mouses
  - Syntactic: “I am cute, amn’t I?

= Overgeneralizations: when learned rules are applied incorrectly (via hypothesis testing) to irregular forms
Teaching/reinforcement?

- Maybe children are *taught* rules that are reinforced when applied correctly, and are corrected when applied in error

BUT…
Sometimes language is **not** taught

- We know many rules of language that we were not taught
Phonological rules

- Past tense of:
  - walk
  - jog
  - lift
  → Add [-t], [-d], or [´d]

- Plural of:
  - cat
  - dog
  - fish
  → Add [-s], [-z], or [-´z]

**Allomorph**: a variant of a morpheme

--morphemes appear in different forms, depending on the phonetic context in which they occur
The Wug Test

This is a wug.

Now there is another one.
There are two of them.
There are two ___.
Morphological rules

- Expletive infixation:
  - Insert expletive (e.g., ‘bloody’, ‘freakin’, ‘f*ckin’…) into a word for emphasis
  e.g., fan-\textit{bloody}-tastic
    - abso-\textit{freakin’}-lutely
    - guaran-\textit{dam}*-tee
    - ri-\textit{goshdarn}-diculous

→ Oklahoma, California, Texas? Iowa?
And...

we sometimes don’t learn things when they are explicitly pointed out...

I gots a question. You mean ‘I have a question?’ I have a question. Question [kwEz–tS’n]. Quextion…
Sometimes language *can’t* be taught

Child: Nobody don’t like me.
Adult: No, say “Nobody likes me.”
Child: Nobody don’t like me.

(dialogue repeated eight times)

Adult: Now, listen carefully. Say, “Nobody likes me.”
Child: Oh, nobody don’t *likes* me.
How do we acquire language?

The Problem:
- Rules of grammar are unconscious
- Language learning process is unconscious
Solution: Innateness

- Humans are *genetically predisposed* to acquire language
- Humans draw upon innate knowledge when learning language
- Such innate knowledge is known as *Universal Grammar*
Evidence for innateness

- Critical Period
  - Eric Lenneberg (1960s)
  - There is a critical period of time (from birth until about puberty) when language must be acquired; after this period, normal language acquisition cannot take place
Support for critical period

- **Brain plasticity**: children, but not adults, can recover from severe left hemisphere damage
  - Younger children recover more completely than older children
Support for critical period

- ‘Wild Children’
  - Children with little or no exposure to language due to unfortunate circumstances
Genie

- Discovered in 1970, 13 1/2 yrs. old
- She was never spoken to or allowed to speak
- After intervention, began to learn language, though slowly
- But she never learned language normally (level of 2 1/2 yrs. old)