

A ROUTLEDGE FREEBOOK

# Routledge Guides to Linguistics: A FreeBook Sampler




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# Introduction

Are you a student interested in learning about linguistics? A layperson wondering what linguistics is? Or a professor searching for a new way to introduce students to the field?

This Freebook represents a unique cooperative venture between the Linguistic Society of America and Routledge, which have joined together to produce a series of short volumes on topics in linguistics. This project had its roots in a series of pamphlets produced by the LSA in the 1990s, entitled *Frequently Asked Questions about Linguistics*. The goal of the pamphlets was to answer questions that newcomers to linguistics, or those with limited or no background in the study of language, frequently pose, such as:

- Does the language I speak influence the way I think?
- How many languages are there in the world?
- Is English changing?
- How can I communicate with a relative who's had a stroke?
- What is Ebonics?
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and many others. The instinct behind the original series of pamphlets (still available for download at <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/lsa-publications/faq-pamphlets>) was that non-specialists are frequently fascinated by questions such as these but may not know where to go for authoritative answers.

Building on the success of the pamphlets, the LSA and Routledge have developed the series *Routledge Guides to Linguistics* with a similar audience in mind. These books are designed to appeal to beginning linguistics students, undergraduates who are curious about studying linguistics, and laypersons who are simply interested in human language. They require no prior knowledge of linguistics, and they're written in an engaging style by experts in the field. In addition to being suitable for use as core textbooks, they work well as supplementary readings: Imagine, for example, using *Language in Children* as a way to add an acquisition emphasis to Linguistics 101, following each topic – phonology, morphology, etc. – with a consideration of how that particular area of competence develops in children; or using *Why Study Linguistics?* prior to the standard introductory text, to increase student engagement. Or you might simply want to give a copy to your bright college-bound niece or nephew to pique their interest or address a question they've asked.

This freebook gives you a taste of the series by providing the first chapter of each of the first three volumes in the series: *Language in Children*, by Eve V. Clark; *Language and Meaning*, by Betty J. Birner; and *Is English Changing?*, by Steve Kleinedler.

Upcoming titles include:

- *Ebonics*, by Sonja Lanehart
- *Why Study Linguistics?*, by Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck
- *Sign Languages*, by Diane Lillo-Martin, Sandra Wood, and Joseph Hill
- *Bilingualism*, by Shahrzad Mahootian
- *Language, Gender, and Sexuality: An Introduction*, by Scott F. Kiesling

Ultimately, the goal for the series is twofold: to spread engaging, factual information about human language at a level accessible to anyone, regardless of prior study; and to increase knowledge of, and interest in, the field of linguistics. As a bonus, a portion of the profits from the sale of every book will go directly to the LSA, to support its many-faceted work in support of linguistic scholarship, outreach, and advocacy.

If you would like to consider adopting any of these books for your courses, you can request a free e-inspection copy on the book's web page, via [Routledge.com](http://Routledge.com).

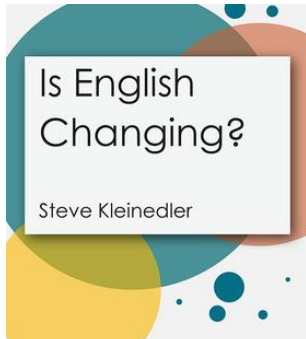
We hope you will enjoy this free taste of the series, and more than that, we hope that these volumes will extend the study and understanding of human language to a new and broader audience.

Betty J. Birner  
Series Editor



# Is English Changing?

# 1. *Is English Changing?*, Chapter 1



The following is excerpted from *Is English Changing?* by Steve Kleinedler. © 2018 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.

Learn more:



*NOTE: This chapter is an advance uncorrected proof. Is English Changing? will publish in March 2018.*

## 1.0 Is English changing?

Actually, it is easy to answer the question that the title of this book poses. Yes, the English language is changing.

You have a powerful tool for analyzing language: yourself. Take a few moments and reflect on your personal experience as a person who uses language. You should easily be able to pinpoint events from the last fifteen years of your life that reflect change in the English language (and in any other language you might speak in addition to English).

Now, let's step back a little further in time.

- In the 1950s and 1960s, the Cold War escalated between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective spheres of influence. Both countries wanted to be the first to land a spacecraft on the moon. This space race led to increased interest in astronomy and physics across all levels of education and in the popular culture.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, the processing power of computers expanded exponentially. Completely new occupations that involved computer technology developed, including programming and data analysis. The use of computers to streamline business operations began to affect the way people dealt with hospitals, banks, educational institutions, and government agencies.
- In the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, the development and proliferation of the internet rapidly intensified the degree to which people used computer technology in most aspects of their lives. The way in which most people acquire news, get information, and maintain social connections changed drastically.

All of these developments had an effect on language. New words have entered the language. New senses of existing words have developed. There are new ways of communicating and exchanging information.

Change is not a new phenomenon, however. Language change didn't begin after World War II.

A thousand years ago, written language was passed from generation to generation by scribes and monks. In the mid-1400s, the invention of the printing press made the

written word much more widely available. In the 1800s, the development of the telegraph meant that messages could be sent across vast distances in short periods of time. Each development that has improved the ability to communicate a message has led to the growth and spread of language. With this growth and spread comes change.

Written forms of language only go back several thousand years. Egyptian hieroglyphs date back almost 48 centuries. The unrecorded history of language goes back much further. Some theories of language development propose that language arose in one location and spread across the earth, and other theories propose that language sprung up independently in multiple locations. Regardless of which theory represents what actually happened, the language you speak is different than that of your parents, and of their parents, and so on, running backward through a multitude of generations. Indeed, the language you yourself speak is different from what you spoke last year, or ten years ago.

### 1.1 Welcome to the field of linguistics

The study of language is called linguistics. This textbook is a broad overview of the field of linguistics. It is written for people who have had little exposure to linguistic terminology. It does not assume familiarity with the subject matter. By using simple vocabulary and avoiding complicated terminology and philosophy, it is hoped that you will have an easier time understanding abstract or difficult concepts. You will be asked to observe how you use language. These observations will help guide your understanding of basic linguistic concepts.

Each chapter explores a different subfield, such as sound, structure, meaning, context, and variation. You will be introduced to these subfields with a brief overview. Then, we'll look at features of that topic that show why *yes* is the answer to the question *Is language changing?*

Although *linguistics* refers to the study of language itself, this introductory textbook focuses primarily on linguistic phenomena in English. However, we will sometimes examine how some of the concepts being discussed manifest in other languages. If this survey of language and language change piques your interest, you are encouraged to pursue these topics at your educational institution or on your own.

Further study will provide you with the opportunity to learn how these components operate in a multitude of languages from many language families. If your school has a linguistics department, each of the topics we discuss is often the focus of an entire course, so if something interests you, look into it further! Regardless of the opportunities available to you at your school, you can also explore topics of interest in greater detail on your own. At the end of each chapter in this book, there will be a short list of books that expand upon some of the ideas addressed in the chapter.

The chief assertion of this chapter is that language is changing. The very act of expressing yourself keeps the language you're using current and vital. So, let's look at the flip side. What happens if there is no change? Languages that don't change are dead languages. They are frozen. New words are not added because there are no native speakers left to use them to communicate.

An unknown number of languages have been lost forever. If a population died out or was forced to learn a new language by a conquering people, the language used by that people is gone forever if there is no written record of it. (Documenting endangered languages is an important area of linguistic research. The Endangered Language Project at [www.endangeredlanguages.com](http://www.endangeredlanguages.com) is an excellent resource.)

Scholars have reconstructed a handful of languages without a written record—primarily languages that modern languages have descended from. This reconstruction has been accomplished by examining the similarities and differences in those modern languages and their earlier forms. The prefix *proto-* describes a reconstructed language that language families descend from. One such reconstructed language is Proto-Indo-European, a distant ancestor of English.

Sometimes, scholars have become aware of dead languages of antiquity because of written artefacts that exist, such as Sumerian (one of the first written languages) or Etruscan (the language of the ancient country of Etruria in present-day Italy). Other languages, such as Ubykh, a language once spoken in the Caucasus (and later, after the population emigrated, Turkey), have only more recently become dead languages as the last living speakers themselves have died.<sup>[1]</sup>

Very rarely, a formerly dead language can be resuscitated. Perhaps the best-known example is Hebrew. Hebrew, as a spoken language, was displaced by Aramaic and other languages over time and eventually came to be used only in religious texts. In the late 1800s, Hebrew was revived as a spoken language when groups of Jews across the world began to learn it and use it instead of their native language. More important to the process of reviving Hebrew, people who learned Hebrew as adults used it with their children. For these children, Hebrew was their native language. When the modern state of Israel was established in 1948, Hebrew was chosen as its national language. In the years since, millions of people have learned Hebrew as their first language.

### **Something you can do!**

- List an example of a dead language from each continent.
- How many speakers did these languages have at its peak?
- What led to these languages extinction?

## **1.2 A brief comparison of Old English, Middle English, and Modern English**



So far, we've only looked at a few broad, general statements regarding the fact that languages are changing, by virtue of their being used actively by speakers and writers for communication. A simple examination of historical English texts will easily demonstrate that the English language has changed considerably since Old English began to become distinct from other West Germanic languages around the 6th century CE. (Other West Germanic languages include German and Dutch; historically, the West Germanic language closest to English is Frisian, a language of the northern Netherlands.)

### 1.2.1 Old English

One of the earliest known works written in English is *Beowulf*, a poem written in Old English sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries. The name of its author is unknown. This poem tells the tale of a hero named Beowulf who defeats a monster named Grendel. Beowulf becomes king of an area that is now part of Sweden. Here are the first few lines of this poem:

Hwæt we Gar-Dena      in gear-dagum  
    þeod-cyninga          þrym gefrunon,  
hu ða æþelinga        sellen fremedon.

This is Old English, and it is almost entirely unrecognizable to speakers of Modern English. There are unfamiliar letters:

- theash, æ, pronounced like the 'a' in *bat*
- thethorn, þ, pronounced like the 'th' in *thin*
- theedh, ð, pronounced like the 'th' in *the*

The only word in this passage that is the same in Modern English is *in*. (*Hu*, meaning "how," comes close.)

*Beowulf* has been translated in Modern English by many Old English scholars. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney published *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* in 2012. In it, this passage reads as follows:

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by  
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.  
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

For comparison, here's how an earlier translation from 1910 reads. It is from the Harvard Classics series, translated by American educator Francis Gummere:

O, praise of the prowess of people-kings  
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,  
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!

The phrase *in gear-dagum*, for example, is translated in the Heaney version as “in days gone by” and in the Gummere version as “in days long sped.”

Let’s dig deeper and pick apart piece by piece the components of the Old English word *gear-dagum*. You’ll start to see a few more similarities. In Old English, *g* before certain vowels, including *e*, is pronounced more like *y*. In fact, Old English *gear* means “year.”

### Something you can do!

Anetymology shows the path a word has taken to get to its present form. Consult a dictionary that includes etymologies, so that you can see how *year* developed over the past centuries into its present Modern English form. Here are three dictionary entries for the word *year*:

- *American Heritage Dictionary*: [ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=year](http://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=year)
- *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/year](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/year)
- *Oxford English Dictionary*: [oed.com/view/Entry/231475](http://oed.com/view/Entry/231475)

(If your institution doesn’t subscribe to the online OED, access this entry at its associated free site at [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/year](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/year).)

The Modern English word *yore*, which means “time long past,” also comes from Old English *gear*. The word nowadays is most commonly used in the phrase *days of yore*. Heaney translates the *gear* in *Beowulf* as “gone by.”

The Old English word for “day” is *dæg*. Again, you can see a similarity to Modern English. If you’re familiar with German, you’ll see that the German word for “day” (*Tag*) shows a similarity as well. The Old English and Old German words for “day” come from the same source, and regular patterns in how sounds have changed over time explain why the Modern English and Modern German words are pronounced differently.

In Modern English, the way most singular nouns become plural is through the addition of *-s* on the end, such as *cat/cats*. We say that English shows inflection for number. Old English does too, and it also shows inflectional endings that indicate different relationships (called cases) between the nouns and the words around them. (Inflections, along with the concepts of *number* and *case*, are covered in Chapter 3.) In Modern English, we see remnants of this case system with pronouns (*I/me/my, she/her/hers*) and with the possessive forms of nouns (*dog/dog’s*).

One of the cases of Old English is called the dative case. The dative case is used to indicate that a noun is an indirect object. (The indirect object in the sentence *Olivia gave Mia the ball* is *Mia*.) The dative case is also used after certain prepositions, including *in*.

*Dagum* is the dative plural form of *dæg*. It is shown by the *-um* ending and the change

of the vowel from *æ* to *a*. Therefore, *dagum* means “days”—specifically, it is the form of “days” that is used as an indirect object or after prepositions like *in*. *In gear-dagum* thus translates as “in yore-days” or, as Heaney says, “in days of old.”

Reading ahead in *Beowulf*, you can see stronger relationships with Modern English. Line 11 reads *þæt wæs god cyning!* This is very similar to Heaney’s translation “That was one good king!”

For the most part, though, you would need to study Old English (or use a version that has the original text on one side and the translation on the other) to make your way through *Beowulf* in the original Old English.

### Something you can do!

- Find a copy of *Beowulf* online or at your library.
- Compare several lines with the Modern English translation.
- List other connections between Modern English and Old English that you find.

Two online resources for the Gummere translation are:

- [poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/50114](http://poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/50114)
- [literatureproject.com/beowulf/index.htm](http://literatureproject.com/beowulf/index.htm)

### 1.2.2 Middle English

Moving forward to Middle English, we begin to see even more similarities with Modern English. In 1066, the Norman Conquest changed the English language considerably. The Norman language, spoken in Normandy, is a Romance language similar to French. When William the Conqueror became the king of England, the language of the Normans had a lasting effect on English. The Norman Conquest marked the beginning of the transition period between Old English and Middle English. The form of English used from roughly 1100 until the late 1400s is known as Middle English.

One of the best-known written examples of Middle English is *The Canterbury Tales*. This work was written in the late 1300s by the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400). Here are the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote

Although this passage is well over 600 years old, you should be able to understand a great deal of it. In fact, with the knowledge that *shoures* means “showers” and *soote* means “sweet,” you can probably fully comprehend the first two lines. Additionally, this rhyming couplet indicates that our word *sweet* once rhymed with *root*! From this snippet, we can see changes in vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structure.

You can find a copy of *The Canterbury Tales* online at [librarius.com/cantales.htm](http://librarius.com/cantales.htm). Many

publishing companies have fine versions of Chaucer's work, such as the one edited by Jill Mann for Penguin Classics.

### 1.2.3 Modern English

Modern English is the form of English used since about 1500. The English playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was one of the earliest writers in Modern English. Shakespeare is probably one of the best-known and most-read authors of his time period. In the past 400 years, his works have been produced countless times. Dozens of his phrases first written by him have become regular idioms, from “dead as a doornail” to “set my teeth on edge.” Here is a portion of *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, scene 2, taken from the Second Folio:

Whats Montague? it is nor hand nor foote,  
Nor arme nor face, o besome other name  
Belonging to a man.  
Whats in a name[?] that which we call a rose,  
By any other word would smell as sweete

It's easy to spot a few minor spelling differences (*foot/foote*, *arm/arme*, *sweet/sweete*, and *What's/Whats*). If you were expressing this thought nowadays, you might phrase it slightly differently, but it is nonetheless completely comprehensible.

You can access the full text of *Romeo and Juliet* at:

- [shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo\\_juliet/full.html](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo_juliet/full.html)  
[opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/playmenu.php?WorkID=romeojuliet](http://opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/playmenu.php?WorkID=romeojuliet)

### 1.3 English is changing

To reiterate the theme of this textbook, language is changing. Individual shifts are part of a continuum of change. Even though the year 1100 is the cut-off between Old English and Middle English and 1500 is the cut-off between Middle English and Modern English, these points in time should not be thought of as representing an abrupt shift from one form of the language to another. Elements of Middle English in the beginning of its period are going to have more in common with elements of later Old English. Similarly, elements of later Middle English are going to have more in common with early Modern English.<sup>[ii]</sup>

This quick look at evidence from Old English, Middle English, and the early days of Modern English should provide you with ample evidence that English has changed. And, if you browse newspaper archives from the beginning of the 1900s, even though you might find unusual turns of phrase, you should be able to understand almost everything you read. On an even shorter timescale, you should be able to quickly devise a list of words that were in vogue when you were in elementary school that have fallen

out of your vocabulary. Likewise, there are words that were introduced then that are now an integral part of the language.

So, yes, it is clear that the English language has changed and continues to change. The language used in a Shakespeare play might sound old-fashioned. The dialogue in a 1940s film noir might sound quaint. The conversations in a coming-of-age teen comedy from the 1980s might sound ridiculous to modern ears. But all of these are representative of the English language.

Often when people ask whether language is changing, their questions stem from a fear of change. As far back as the Greek philosopher Socrates, older generations have bemoaned that the younger generations are talking incorrectly, or that the people from the other side of the tracks don't speak as well they do. When fear of what is new or different drives the discussion of change, change is often seen as something negative that affects the status quo.

In the 1960s, many people who wrote about language cringed at the thought of using *contact* as a verb (as in the sentence *Please contact me at your earliest convenience*). You've probably never heard of a rule that you shouldn't use *contact* as a verb and it might seem odd or ridiculous that doing so was ever considered controversial. In the 1980s, as the pronunciation of *harass* shifted from HAIR-us to huh-RASS, there were many arguments regarding what pronunciation should be considered correct. Nowadays, the use of huh-RASS is completely unremarkable in the United States. In the current day, there's debate about whether use of *they* in the singular is acceptable, although such usage goes back several centuries. (All of these topics will be discussed later in the book.) There is a whole industry devoted to educating people on style and usage.

This would be an appropriate place to point out that I am a lexicographer—a person who compiles and edits dictionaries. Since 1997, I have been on the staff of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* and, since 2011, I have been its executive editor. As such, I frequently am contacted by traditionalists who bemoan what they consider to be the loose standards of spoken and written English, and by people who fear (or profit from making others fear) change and variation. If you're wondering how a dictionary editor could take a seemingly laid-back attitude toward language change, consider that, simply stated, the purpose of most dictionaries is to *describe* how language *is* used. Usage guidance is offered for those who are interested in the traditions of what are considered to be proper grammar, style, and usage. (Dictionaries and style guides are discussed in chapter 8.)

Like most linguists, I believe that if you can communicate effectively, you are using language properly. There is a "rule" that states that you shouldn't split infinitives; that

is, you shouldn't put words between *to* and the bare form of the verb, as in the oft-quoted example *to boldly go*. This "rule" is easily and often "broken," and people who split their infinitives are readily understood. The actual rules of English are ones that don't need to be taught to native speakers because native speakers learned them as infants and toddlers. Native speakers of English know without being taught that *the the mat cat on is* is not a well-formed sentence. The actual rules of English are those that allow you to identify sentences as *The cat is on the mat* or *It's the mat that the cat is on* as grammatical and strings like *the the mat mat cat on is* as ungrammatical.

Almost all linguists view change in language either neutrally or positively. A neutral viewpoint is one that change is change and is inherently neither good nor bad: it is merely change. A positive viewpoint is one that considers the effects of the change—the varieties of language that develop that distinguish the speaking patterns of different communities and locations across the globe—to be a positive force in keeping the language alive and dynamic.

Linguistic change itself is a neutral phenomenon to which no value judgment can be ascribed. It can be argued that the sociological changes that arise have either a neutral or a positive effect on the language itself and on its speakers and their culture. The philosophy that I reject in this book is the notion that language change and variation diminish the value of a language.

#### 1.4 Overview of this book

In the following chapters, we will examine these areas of English:

- How English sounds (phonology)
- How English is structured (syntax)
- What English words mean (semantics)
- How context affects how English is understood (pragmatics)
- How English varies from place to place (regional variation/dialectology)
- How English varies among social categories (social variation/dialectology)

In addition to learning about the basic fundamentals of these topics, you will also see how the study of each area supports the statement that language is changing.

Lastly, in contrast to language rules that you implicitly learn as a native speaker, we will look at the arbitrary rules of English that are dictated, including spelling and usage. We will examine why these kinds of rules exist, and why efforts to prevent language from changing are usually futile.

This book is intended to give you an overview of the way English is structured, and how these structures undergo and have undergone change. It will emphasize on how change is something that can be embraced rather than feared. Change will always be a

part of a living language, and knowing about the linguistic phenomena that all languages share will allow you to take an interest in language as it is used around you.

Earlier in this chapter, you came across a feature called **Something you can do!** Throughout this book, this feature suggests a simple activity that challenges you to think about a topic in more detail. Sometimes questions are posed for you to think about, and others involve discussion with other students.

If you want to delve deeper into the topics that are discussed, endnotes marked **Further Reading** point you toward publications that will help you explore that subject. (Full bibliographical information for these titles, along with all publications mentioned in the text, can be found in the References section at the end of this book.)

Each chapter concludes with **Questions for Discussion**. These open-ended questions are intended to be a springboard for class discussion.

### 1.5 Questions for discussion

- Is language changing?
- What happens if a language stops changing?
- What is linguistics?
- How is Old English different from Modern English?
- How has English changed since you were born?
- If English is not your native language, how has your first language changed since you were born?

[\[i\]](#) **Further Reading:** David Crystal, *Language Death*; Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *The Extinction of the World's Languages*. (The References section following the endnotes has full bibliographic information for books and articles shown in **Further Reading** endnotes. If the reference is to an online article, the endnote will include the URL.)

[\[ii\]](#) **Further Reading:** John Algeo and Carmen A. Butcher, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*; Laurel Brinton and Leslie Arnovick, *The English Language: A Linguistic History*.



# Language and Meaning

## 2. *Language and Meaning*, Chapter 1



The following is excerpted from *Language and Meaning* by Betty J. Birner. © 2018 Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved.



### Introduction

What is meaning? That sounds like a fairly philosophical question, and it is; but it's also a linguistic one. We say that life has meaning, but we also say that words have meaning. Is it the same kind of meaning? This book is about the second type of meaning – the meanings of words and sentences. So it won't help you understand the meaning of life (sorry), but it will help you understand the meaning of the word *life*, and what happens when two or more people attempt to communicate linguistically.

When we talk to another person, we think of our words as conveying meaning – but a little thought might convince you that this isn't what happens at all. In the most literal sense, when I speak to you, nothing leaves my head and enters yours; nothing is really 'conveyed' except for sound waves. So what is this 'meaning' that we feel we're somehow giving to the other person, and how does it get to them? Human relationships are so fundamentally grounded in language and communication that it's worth considering exactly what meaning is and how it works – as well as what sometimes causes it to go wrong.

In this book, we'll consider what it means to mean. In this first chapter, we'll consider the surprisingly large number of things that the word *mean* can mean. We'll look at the difference between linguistic and non-linguistic meaning, and at the difference between the literal meanings of words and sentences and how these can be used to 'mean' a much greater range of things. We'll look more broadly at the field of linguistics, the scientific study of human language, and what it can tell us about how linguistic form and meaning are related. In Chapter 2, we'll look at the philosophy of language: the relationship between language and thought, the location and types of meaning, and the relationship between meaning and truth. In Chapter 3, we'll consider the literal meanings of words and sentences, what it really means to know the meaning of a word, how meanings can be represented, and how simple meanings are built up into more complex meanings. In Chapter 4, we'll dig more deeply into the question of how speakers use these literal meanings to convey their intended meanings, which can sometimes be quite different from what they've literally said. We'll see how theories of pragmatics can help to explain how hearers infer what speakers intended, even if what they've literally said seems quite different. At the same time, we'll see how this process of inference leaves the door open for these inferences to be mistaken, resulting in miscommunication and misunderstanding: Sometimes our hearer just doesn't get our meaning at all. Chapter 5 will summarize the previous chapters and wrap up.


## What does it mean to mean?

To dive right into the deep end of the pool, let's start with the meaning of *meaning*. The first thing to notice is that there's obviously a difference between the word *meaning* and what it, well, means – or, to put it another way, what we use it to refer to. (Throughout this book, I'll use italics for linguistic items like words, so that it's clear when we're talking about a word vs. when we're using it – what's known as the 'use' vs. 'mention' distinction.)

The verb *mean* and the related noun *meaning*, as it turns out, have a surprisingly large number of meanings. Consider the sentences in (1):

- (1) a What is the meaning of life?
- b I didn't mean to hurt you.
- c Those dark clouds mean rain is coming.
- d *Dissimilar* means 'not alike'.
- e By *home*, I mean my parents' house, not my college dorm.
- f When I kicked you under the table, I meant that you should stop talking about politics.
- g Those sirens mean a tornado has been sighted.
- h I mean to go to England before I die.

In (1a), the speaker is talking about philosophical meaning, which can be very roughly paraphrased as 'purpose'. In (1b), *mean* could be paraphrased as 'intend' – and the extent to which these first two senses of the word *mean* are related is a complicated matter: *Purpose* in some uses can mean *intent* (as in, e.g., my purpose in going to the store), but not everyone asking about life's meaning is asking whether there's an intent behind it. And in (1c), it's quite clear that we've left intent behind: Clouds do not intend to tell us that rain is coming. In (1d), the word *dissimilar* has a fixed meaning that is not dependent on the intent of the person using it; I can't use the word to mean whatever I want. On the other hand, as seen in (1e), I can use *home* to mean my choice of a limited number of places. In (1f), we get even more intentionality and more freedom, and a less fixed meaning: Kicking my companion under the table can mean quite a range of things in various contexts, limited only by my expectation that the person being kicked will get the message. And what about (1g)? The sirens don't intend to convey anything, so in that sense this sort of meaning is like that in (1c); on the other hand, they're a conventional symbol we've all agreed on, so in that sense it's like (1d); but then again, by using this siren on this occasion, somebody intends to indicate the sighting of a tornado, so in that sense it's like (1f). And, finally, in (1h) – a use that appears in some



but not all dialects of English – we’ve abandoned all conventionality; here the meaning is purely an intent, with no sense of one thing standing for another.

In short, we use the word *meaning* for everything from intention-free indication, as in (1c), to indication-free intention, as in (1h), with quite a range in between – in addition to philosophical uses like (1a) and totally distinct uses to mean things like ‘cruel’ or ‘stingy’ (as in *Scrooge was a mean man*, which is ambiguous between those two senses).


Setting aside the philosophical sense of *mean* and its use as an adjective to mean ‘cruel’ or ‘stingy’, we can distinguish two broad categories of meaning based on the degree of intention involved, which philosopher H.P. Grice called ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ meaning. Natural meaning is the sort of meaning we see in sentences like *Those clouds mean rain* or *Smoke means fire* or *That chill in the air means winter is coming*. The relation is a natural one, which is to say that nobody intended it to be that way; it just is. There is no intention involved.

Non-natural meaning, on the other hand, is at least to some extent intentional. Somebody has decided that one thing will mean, or indicate, or stand for, another. For example, a red light means ‘stop’ – but there’s nothing natural about that meaning. It’s almost hard to imagine because we’re so used to this correlation between ‘red’ and ‘stop’, but we could perfectly well have decided as a society that green would mean ‘stop’ and red would mean ‘go’. The meaning is a non-natural one, which in turn means that it’s intentional: Someone, or some group, intends for this correlation to exist.

So which category does language fall into? You may find it counterintuitive, but linguistic meaning is non-natural. There’s no automatic, natural relationship between the word *song* and the type of melodic arrangement it stands for, or between the word *dog* and the type of canine entity it stands for. After all, *dog* doesn’t mean the same thing in French, Urdu, Chinese, or Swahili, all of which have their own words for dogs. The use of the word *dog* for this creature is simply a convention that English speakers have tacitly agreed to. The relationship between most words and what they stand for is arbitrary – there’s no reason the word *chair* couldn’t have ended up meaning ‘canine creature’ – but it’s conventional, meaning everybody who speaks English has in some sense agreed to use that word for that meaning.

Within non-natural meaning, then, we have linguistic meaning and non-linguistic meaning (like the fact that a red light means that you must stop your car). This book is concerned with linguistic meaning – which, as we’ll see, is also subject to various degrees of intentionality, but it’s clear that most linguistic meaning is non-natural in





that the words and phrases involved bear no automatic relationship to what they stand for.


The one exception is *onomatopoeic* language, which bears some natural relation to what it represents in that the word ‘sounds like’ its meaning. Many words for animal sounds (such as *cheep*, *hiss*, or *meow*) are thought to be onomatopoeic, as are words for sounds like *crash* or *bang*. However, even these words differ from language to language; a rooster that says *cock-a-doodle-doo* in English says *kukareku* in Russian. So even here, the relationship between the word and its meaning is partly arbitrary and thus non-natural.

### **Semantic vs. pragmatic meaning: the role of context**

We’ve talked about linguistic meaning as being non-natural and thus being subject to some degree of intentionality: That is, when we speak, we intend that our hearer will understand us to have intended to convey a particular meaning. This ‘intention for our hearer to understand our intention’ is a crucial aspect of language. It also, of course, leads us down a philosophical rabbit hole, because for language to work, our hearer has to recognize that we intend for them to understand our intention to convey meaning, and we have to intend for them to recognize it, and they have to recognize that we intend that, etc. And yes, it can make your head spin. But there’s also a difference between my intention that they recognize the conventional meaning of what I’ve said and my intention that they recognize what I meant right now by saying it in this particular context. Confused? Consider these examples:

- (2) a *Dissimilar* means ‘not alike’. (= (1d))  
b When I said *The pizza is cold*, I meant my slice, not yours.

In (2a), the meaning of *dissimilar* is in some sense fixed; I can’t use this word to mean just any old thing. The meanings of words frequently change over the course of time, but I’m not free to use the word *dissimilar* to mean ‘therefore’ or ‘armadillo’ or ‘television’ – or, more accurately, I’m free to use it however I want, but unless I use it for the conventionally accepted meaning, I can’t reasonably expect that my hearer will understand what I meant. Most of the time, then, I can’t use a word or sentence to mean just any old thing. In some sense, of course, that’s not quite true (hence the hedge ‘most of the time’); you actually *can* use any utterance to mean anything. For example, you can arrange with your spouse before a party that if you say *The dessert was delicious* it will mean ‘I’m having a terrible time and I want to go home’. But in most situations the meaning of your utterance is constrained by its conventionally accepted meaning.




On the other hand, I do have a certain freedom within that conventionally accepted meaning. In (2b), *the pizza* means a certain slice of pizza that is salient in the context of utterance, and this opens up the possibility of misunderstanding. The utterance here suggests that there's been just such a misunderstanding – that the hearer thought the speaker meant all of the pizza present in the context, whereas the speaker in (2b) is clarifying that they meant only their own slice. And of course if the speaker says *The pizza is cold* a week later, they will doubtless be talking about another pizza entirely, whereas the use of *dissimilar* a week from now will still mean 'not alike'. For that matter, the word *pizza* used a week from now will still mean something like 'an Italian pie made of a crust and toppings, typically including tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese'. But the specific pizza intended by the speaker will differ. That is, *pizza* will still mean what *pizza* always means; but what the speaker means by *the pizza* will be different. Thus, there's a difference between **word meaning** (or **sentence meaning**) and **speaker meaning**: The meaning of the word *pizza* is more or less invariant, while the speaker's meaning in using that word can vary from context to context.

Meaning that is more or less independent of context (as in the meaning of the word *pizza*) is called **semantic** meaning. Meaning that depends on the context is called **pragmatic** meaning – but be forewarned that this is a rough definition of this important distinction, and we'll be talking about it in great length later on. For example, another way of framing the difference is to say that semantic meaning is **truth-conditional** and pragmatic meaning is **non-truth-conditional**. In most cases, the two distinctions overlap. Consider (3):

(3) I'm cold.

The conventional, context-independent, semantic meaning of this sentence is (roughly) that the speaker is experiencing a sensation of the ambient temperature being uncomfortably low. This is what it means if uttered today, tomorrow, or next week – here, or in Antarctica, or in Florida – and by me, you, or the President of the U.S. If the speaker is in fact experiencing such a sensation, the sentence is literally true; if they are not, the sentence is literally false. That is to say, the conditions under which it is true – its **truth-conditions** – are the same regardless of context. This meaning is **truth-conditional**. (Of course, the person represented by/will vary by speaker; if (3) is uttered by the President of the U.S., that's the person who must be cold in order for (3) to be true.)

On the other hand, the speaker could use this semantic meaning to convey any number



of additional meanings, which they will count on the hearer to figure out in context. So the speaker in uttering (3) might mean ‘please bring me a blanket’ or ‘close the window’ or ‘turn off the air conditioner’ or ‘turn on the heat’ or ‘cuddle up closer’ or ‘I regret eating this ice cream’ or ‘your brother lied when he said the water in this lake was super-warm’ or any of a hundred other things, depending on who’s saying it to whom and under what conditions. All of these intended meanings are pragmatic, and they’re **non-truth-conditional**, which means that you couldn’t get away with saying (4):

(4) When you said *I’m cold* just now, that was a lie; you’re not eating ice cream!


Because ‘I regret eating this ice cream’ isn’t part of the truth-conditional meaning of *I’m cold*, the fact that you’re not eating ice cream (much less regretting it) doesn’t mean you’ve said something untrue by saying *I’m cold*. Which is to say, you can use the sentence *I’m cold* to mean ‘I regret eating this ice cream’ in a certain context, but whether or not you regret eating ice cream never affects whether the sentence *I’m cold* is true or not; it doesn’t affect the truth-conditions of the sentence *I’m cold*.

Most of the time, meaning that is truth-conditional is also context-independent; that is, there’s a core semantic meaning to the sentence *I’m cold* that determines whether it is true or false in any given situation, and that core meaning doesn’t change from one situation to another. Additional pragmatic meanings (such as ‘I regret eating this ice cream’) that are specific to the current context (i.e., context-dependent) are usually also non-truth-conditional: They don’t affect whether the sentence itself is true, but simply are part of the pragmatic meaning that the speaker intended by uttering this particular sentence at this particular time. Nonetheless, we’ll see later on that the overlap between truth-conditionality and context-independence is not perfect.

### Linguistics and the relation between form and meaning

Semantics and pragmatics are two subfields of the academic field of **linguistics**, which is the scientific study of human language. Often, if you tell someone you’re a linguist, you’ll get one of two responses: Either they’ll say that you must know an awful lot of languages, or they’ll say something like, “Oh, no; I’d better watch how I talk!” But both of these reactions miss the point of linguistics – one more seriously than the other.

It’s true that many linguists do know a lot of languages, simply because linguists tend to be people who love languages, and so they’re likely to be people who love to learn new languages. But while a linguist is a person who knows an awful lot **about** language, they’re not necessarily a person who knows a lot of different languages; the



two are distinct. What a linguist does is to study human language scientifically, the way a botanist studies plants. Linguists ask questions like: What does it mean to know a language? How is linguistic knowledge structured in the human brain? How does a child acquire a native language? What properties are possible in human languages, and what properties are impossible? And most relevantly to the purpose of this book: What's the relationship between language and meaning?

The second reaction – “I’d better watch how I talk” – betrays a more serious misunderstanding of linguistics. Although most people say this jokingly (at least in part), most people have had the experience of being told they’ve said something ‘incorrectly’ or ‘ungrammatically’. So people fear that a linguist may be a card-carrying member of the Language Police who will think less of them if they violate grammar rules they learned in school, for example by ending a sentence with a preposition, using a double negative, or splitting an infinitive. But nothing could be further from the truth. Since a linguist studies language scientifically, linguists don’t take a **prescriptive** approach to language, prescribing how people should talk; instead, they take a **descriptive** approach to language, describing how people actually do talk – just as a botanist describes what a plant actually looks like rather than prescribing what they think it ought to look like.

For this reason, when a linguist uses the word **grammatical**, they’re not talking about whether a sentence adheres to the kinds of so-called grammar rules you may have learned in school (which people violate all the time); they’re talking about whether it adheres to the rules that govern the way people actually use language – most of which they’re unaware of. So the sentences in (5) below aren’t ungrammatical; they’re simply ungrammatical in the dialect known as **Standard English**. They are, however, grammatical in one or more non-standard dialects of English, each of which has its own set of rules.

- (5)
- a My sister ain’t got no ice cream.
  - b My brother ain’t got no ice cream neither.
  - c We heading to the store to get us some ice cream.

Standard English is simply one dialect of English, no better or worse than any other dialect, but it’s the dialect generally used in government, education, and business, so it’s to a person’s advantage to be able to use it.

The sentences in (6), on the other hand, are ungrammatical in all dialects of English:

- (6)     a \*Ice cream none got my sister.  
          b \*Brother my got neither no ice cream.  
          c \*To the store going we getting for ice cream.


But even though we'd all agree that these sentences are ungrammatical (that's what the asterisk means), in a funny way you can still see what they mean. That is, if you heard someone utter (6a), you might think they were odd, or a non-native speaker, or playing around, but you wouldn't wonder whether their sister's got ice cream. So there's a clear difference between form and meaning: A sentence's form can be wrong (that is, it can be ungrammatical) while its meaning is still discernible, or its meaning can be all wrong despite its form being flawless, as famed linguist Noam Chomsky made clear with the sentence in (7):

- (7) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

Here, the meaning is a complete mess (nothing can be both colorless and green, for example), but the form is flawless. So clearly form and meaning in language are to some extent distinct. On the other hand, they do interact: The form of the sentence tells us how the meanings of the words are built up into the meanings of sentences. For example, in (5a) above, it's the form of the sentence that tells us that *my sister* is the subject of *got*, so it's the speaker's sister who doesn't have something, rather than, say, the ice cream not having something. And because *ice cream* is in the direct object position, it's the thing that the speaker's sister has (or, in this case, hasn't) got. The notion that the meanings of larger units (like a sentence) are built up in a predictable way from the meanings of smaller units (like words) is called **compositionality**: That is, the larger meanings are composed of the smaller meanings, according to formal rules.

These formal rules are the grammar of the language, and like semantics and pragmatics, they are part of what linguists study. Because I'll be making reference to different aspects of linguistics throughout this book, I'll take a moment now to briefly describe the primary subfields of linguistics. (By the way, *to briefly describe* is what's known as a split infinitive, and 'don't split infinitives' is one of those prescriptive rules that you may recall from your English classes. Every so often it's fun to violate a prescriptive rule just because you can.)


**Phonetics** is the study of speech sounds – the whole range of sounds that occur in all of the languages of the world. The sounds that occur in English are only a small subset of the full set of sounds that occur in the world's languages. For example, you might know about the African languages that have 'click' consonants; these sounds don't



occur in English. Similarly, you might know about French or German vowels that don't occur in English, such as the vowel in the German word *schön* (meaning 'beautiful'). On the other hand, the 'th' sounds that occur at the beginnings of the English words *think* and *that* (which are slightly different) are relatively rare in the languages of the world, and are often quite difficult for non-native English speakers to master. The study of phonetics covers the way in which sounds are produced (articulatory phonetics), the way they're processed by the hearer (auditory phonetics), and the properties of the sound waves themselves (acoustic phonetics).

**Phonology** is the study of how these sounds pattern in various languages. This involves, on the one hand, which sounds count as the 'same' in a particular language, and on the other hand, the rules for precisely how these sounds will be pronounced in a particular word or phrase. So, for example, in English, /r/ and /l/ count as different sounds, which is why we can distinguish between words like *rift* and *lift*. In Japanese, however, the closest sound to our /l/ counts as one of the possible pronunciations of /r/; in short, these don't count as two separate sounds, and so you'll never see two Japanese words that are distinguished by one of the words containing /r/ and the other containing /l/ in the same position (such as *ray* and *lay*). The two would count as the same word. But on the flip side, English counts an 'aspirated' /p/ and an 'unaspirated' /p/ as the same sound: To see what I mean, say *I potted a geranium* with your hand in front of your mouth, and notice the puff of air when you make the /p/ in *potted*. Now say *I spotted a geranium*, and note that there's little or no noticeable puff of air when you make the /p/ in *spotted*. And yet English speakers consider both to be the 'same' sound – a /p/ sound – and there's no set of two words in English that are distinguished only based on which /p/ they contain. But in Korean, the two count as different sounds – so /pul/ with no aspiration means 'fire', but /phul/ with aspiration (that's what the raised 'h' indicates) means 'grass'. And just as a native Japanese speaker learning English might have trouble with the distinction between /r/ and /l/, a native English speaker learning Korean is likely to have trouble with the distinction between /p/ and /ph/. Because in English these count as the same sound, and English has rules that tell us whether or not to aspirate that /p/ in a given context, we'd have a very hard time ignoring those rules and producing, for example, an unaspirated /p/ at the beginning of the Korean word /pul/. (Try it!)


**Morphology** is the study of word structure and development. You may never have thought about the fact that words have structure, but a word like *irreducibility* is made up of four parts: *ir-*, *reduce*, *-ibil*, and *-ity*. Each part contributes something to the word's meaning: The **root** is *reduce*, and we all know what that means. And to add *-ibil* on the end gives you *reducible* (pay no attention to the minor spelling changes between *-ible*



and *-ibil*), which means ‘able to be reduced’. Now add the *ir-* at the beginning, meaning ‘not’, and you get ‘unable to be reduced’. Finally, throw on the *-ity*, which changes the whole thing to a noun meaning ‘the property of’, and you get ‘the property of being unable to be reduced’. This is also, incidentally, a really good example of compositionality, which I mentioned before. You might think I cheated in adding those pieces in just the right order: How did I know that *-ibil* should be added before *ir-*, for example? Well, sometimes it’s clear: There’s no such concept as to *irreduce*, but there is such a thing as being *reducible*. On the other hand, sometimes it’s not clear at all: If my husband and I have just arrived at a hotel, and ten minutes later I tell him my suitcase is *unpacked*, that’s probably a good thing. But if we haven’t left home yet, and we need to leave in ten minutes, and I tell him that my suitcase is still *unpacked*, that’s a bad thing. In the first case, *unpacked* is interpreted as *unpack+ed*, that is, the past tense of *unpack*: I have finished unpacking. In the second case, *unpacked* is interpreted as *un+packed*, meaning ‘not packed’: I have not yet packed for the trip. *Unpacked*, therefore, is an **ambiguous** word, which means that it has more than one distinct meaning. In short, the structure of a word – how it is put together – matters.

**Syntax** is the study of sentence structure. Thus, it’s similar to morphology, but at a higher level. We see a similar sort of ambiguity here, too: If I say *Mary is an American History teacher*, I might mean that she’s an American who teaches History (in which case we’re interpreting *American History teacher* as ‘American + [History teacher]’), or I might mean that she’s a teacher of American History (in which case we’re interpreting *American History teacher* as ‘[American History] + teacher’). Another classic linguistics example of syntactic ambiguity is *John saw the boy with the telescope*: Who’s got the telescope, John or the boy? All of the examples of ambiguity we’ve looked at so far are cases of **structural ambiguity**, because the ambiguity results from there being two different structures available for the word or sentence in question. Like morphology, then, syntax is highly structure-dependent: The meaning of the sentence depends on its structure. This again is due in part to compositionality, since the meaning of the sentence is built up in a predictable way from the meanings of its parts (the words) and how they’re put together according to a set of rules (the grammar). Syntax will play a role in our discussion of meaning, because of this interplay between the meanings of smaller units and the rules for building them up into larger units with structurally predictable meanings.


**Semantics**, of course, is a primary focus of this book, but it’s also the one of the main subfields of linguistics – the study of literal (or context-independent, or truth-conditional) meaning. As we’ve already seen, the semantic meaning of a sentence depends on the semantic meanings of its component words and how those words are



built up into phrases, and how those phrases are put together to make sentences. I'll have a great deal to say below about word meaning, relationships among words, sentence meanings, and relationships among sentences. We think we know what a simple word like *sandwich* means, but whole court cases have hinged on the precise meaning of such words, and it turns out that people don't agree on what counts as a *sandwich* at all.

**Pragmatics** is another primary focus of this book, as well as one of the main subfields of linguistics. As discussed above, it has to do with meaning in context, and how we determine what someone really 'meant' by what they said. And here too we'll find compositionality at work: What we take someone's meaning to be will be determined in part by what the surrounding utterances (and the rest of the context) are like. So our interpretation of a discourse is built up from its pieces (utterances) and how those pieces are put together and relate both to each other and to the surrounding non-linguistic context (things like where and when the discourse is taking place). The simplest example is a sentence like *I saw the dog* vs. *I saw a dog*: the determiner (*the* vs. *a*) affects the interpretation of *dog* – i.e., which dog is being referred to. Those are the subfields of linguistics that we'll be most interested in, but there are many others. The field of **language acquisition** deals with how children are able to acquire such a complex system so quickly and effortlessly (spoiler: many linguists think some of this knowledge is innate). Researchers in **second language learning** study how people learn additional languages and the best methods for helping them.

**Sociolinguistics** addresses the differences in language use among different groups, such as dialect differences between different ethnic groups in America, between men and women, or between different regions of the U.S., and how people's sense of identity is connected to their language use. **Psycholinguistics** uses scientific methods to study how people process and interpret language; it's essentially the study of language as a window into the human mind. **Neurolinguistics** is the related study of how language works in the human brain – where the relevant neural structures are, how they operate, and what happens when they are damaged. There are many other subfields of linguistics as well: There are field linguists who travel to remote regions of the world to learn about the languages spoken there, linguists who study writing systems, linguists who study language change through history, lexicographers who document the words of a language by creating dictionaries, and specialists in signed languages, machine languages, artificial intelligence, animal communication, translation and interpretation, cryptology and code-breaking, teaching English to non-native speakers, and many other areas. And in every one of these areas, meaning is a central concern – because when you come right down to it, the central purpose of human language is to



convey meaning.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we've seen that the notion of 'meaning' is not a single concept, and that even the idea of linguistic meaning covers a lot of territory. In covering what a speaker 'means' and how a hearer comes to understand and interpret this meaning, we need to talk about issues in philosophy, semantics, and pragmatics. Within philosophy, we'll ask questions like: What's the relationship between language and thought? Where does meaning reside? When I use a phrase like *the apple*, what am I referring to – a real-world object, or something in my mind? What if I'm wrong about the object being an apple; have I failed to refer to anything? How do I structure my beliefs? How are beliefs and ideas shared? What's the relationship between meaning and truth?

That seems like a lot to handle, but it's only the beginning. Heading into semantics, we'll talk about what it means to know the meaning of a word, how word and sentence meanings relate to each other, how we can represent word and sentence meanings formally (and why we'd want to bother), how we build sentence meanings out of word and phrase meanings, and how reporting someone else's beliefs and meanings complicates things.

Finally, we'll move to pragmatics – meaning in context. We'll talk about how speakers use a combination of semantic meaning and discourse context to try to convey their intended meaning, and how hearers use some basic shared principles to figure out what the intended meaning must have been. We'll see how some aspects of an utterance are taken as new and informative while others are taken as either already-known or presupposed, and how those assumptions affect the hearer's interpretation. We'll also see how different word orders for the same semantic content (think of *John threw the ball* vs. *The ball was thrown by John*) affect the way that content is interpreted. We'll see how utterances can change the world in specific circumstances (such as an appropriate official saying *I now pronounce you married*). Finally, we'll look at the surprisingly complicated question of how much of a sentence's meaning really is semantic and how much is pragmatic. Throughout, we'll keep returning to the basic question we started with: What, after all, **is** meaning?



# Language in Children

### 3. *Language in Children*, Preface and Chapter 1



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#### Preface

In learning to talk, children master a complex system and apply a variety of skills in doing so. This book is intended to offer a first look at what is involved as children acquire a language, how adults talk with them, from a few months old onwards, and how interaction between adult and child plays a critical role in the process of acquisition. Young children attend to expert speakers, talk with them, get feedback from them, and, in interacting, practise what they have acquired so far.

This book gives examples of what children can say at different stages, how they elaborate their utterances as they learn to communicate effectively with language and gesture, establish and accumulate common ground, and add new information when they can to what the other speaker has just said. We know a lot about some of the processes involved, but there are many questions waiting to be asked, and answered, in this field.

My goal in writing this book is to encourage readers to pursue the questions and issues touched on here, find out more about the process of acquisition, and pursue questions about how the amount of social and communicative interaction children have access to affects their acquisition and early use of a language.

EVC


Stanford

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#### Chapter 1

##### **Where do children learn a first language?**

In this chapter, we examine the setting in which children first come to understand and produce language. We'll begin with some general sign-posts along the way as children begin to master and then become more skilled in using language. We'll also consider, briefly, some of the earlier views of this process, before we turn to some of the general



issues we need to address in relation to the process of language acquisition.

### Signposts

Very young children show initial comprehension of a few words somewhere around 8 to 10 months, and they typically produce their first words between 11 or 12 and 20 months. Next, they begin to produce longer utterances by combining gestures and words, and then producing two or more words together. This may happen anywhere between 14 and 15 months and 18 and 22 months. (There can be as much as a year's difference in when particular children master a specific feature of language.) Once children begin to combine words, they also start to add word endings like the plural *-s* in English, and add in small words like *the*, *of*, or *in* as well. Again, learning where and when to use word endings as well as these small grammatical words (often called **function** words) takes time. In some languages, children master these elements in the language by around age 6. In others, some of these details may take them much longer, up to as late as age 10 or 12.

Once children can combine two or more words, they also start to do more complicated things with language. And when they can produce utterances with three or four words, they start using more complex constructions too. For example, they add information to distinguish among the people or objects they are referring to, as in *the blue car, the man with the red hat, the girl who's running*. They start to talk about sequences of events: *He ran outside and then he climbed the hill*. They talk about causal events: *They made the boat capsize*. They talk about contingent events: *If it rains, we'll play inside*. They start to express beliefs and attitudes: *I think they like spinach, He wants to have a picnic*. And they gradually learn how to do all sorts of things with language, from telling jokes – a favourite at age 5 – to persuading, instructing, managing, and cooperating in all sorts of activities, and also telling more and more elaborate stories.

### Some proposals about acquisition

People have long puzzled over how children come to acquire their first language, and a variety of proposals have been made at various times. Here we'll briefly consider a few of these proposals, and why they fail as an adequate account of what goes on as children acquire language. In effect, many proposals that have been made present an unrealistic picture of how acquisition occurs, how long it takes, and the role adults play in it.

One view that arises from behaviourist approaches to psychology is that adults *teach*


children their first language. They do this, it is proposed, first by approving of any babbled sounds that belong in the language, but ignoring any sounds that don't belong. Sounds that are accepted, approved of, become shaped into sequences that constitute words. Adults don't reinforce erroneous forms, so even if these were produced, they would be short-lived. The same approach is assumed to work for acquiring words and constructions.

<i>Age/stage</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	<i>Production</i>
6–8 months	2–4 frequent words	(early babbling)
9–12 months	10–30 words, frequent routine phrases	babbling, 1–2 words
13–22 months	simple instructions, answer simple questions	10–50 words, word-combinations
2;0–2;6	answer more question types, understand 1000–1500 words	100–600 words, many question types; start to produce more complex constructions
2;6–3;6	increasing skill in turn-taking; further increases in vocabulary size	initiate many interactions, propose new topics, and ratify new information
3;6–5;0	near adult timing in turn-taking; up to 14,000 words by age 6;0	variety of complex constructions, vocabulary of ~6000+ words by age 5; regular addition of new information in own turns; some rudimentary storytelling
5;0+	good comprehension, follow instructions	persuade, give instructions, tell more structured stories, and keep track of characters

**Note:** Typically a year or more's variance in when a particular child reaches these milestones.

However, parents actually appear to approve of every vocalization – and hence many non-native sounds – produced by babies as they babble. And they typically approve of any attempts to communicate, however defective. Young children start out with many elements 'missing' from their early utterances, and they make certain consistent, and often long-lasting, errors, retaining non-adult-like forms over weeks and even months. In doing this, they seem to be regularizing their language: they make irregular forms





regular, as in *sit* with *sitted* as its (regular) past tense, or *mouse* with *mouses* as its (regular) plural form. So it is unclear what role adult approval (reinforcement) or lack of approval actually plays in the process of acquisition.


A related view here is that children simply imitate what they hear around them. But if they learn language by imitating other speakers, why do they begin with just one word at a time, and that only at 12–15 months of age? Why do they take such a long time to put two words together in an utterance? And why do they leave out word endings and small grammatical words like *to*, *of*, and *the* for so long? That is, their early utterances do not seem to be direct imitations of any adult model in their vicinity.

A rather drastic alternative to these views, proposed in the 1960s, was that adults play virtually no role in children's acquisition. They provide no feedback and so never correct errors. Indeed, there is no need in this view for any feedback because the language itself – at least the grammar – is assumed to be innate. At the same time, proponents of this view agree that children do have to learn the sounds of a language, somehow. They also have to learn the vocabulary, which can amount to between 50,000 and 100,000 words by age 20 or so – hence, a massive learning task. But the grammar is there from the beginning, it is claimed, and, in this view, that is what is most important.

Yet children take time to settle on or identify properties central to the grammar of the language they are acquiring, and the process involved in going from innate grammatical categories to possible syntactic constructions in a language has yet to be fleshed out. Moreover, as we will see, adults do offer feedback as part of the conversational to-and-fro as they check up on what their children mean, and they do this for all aspects of the language being acquired. (And we will see how this plays an essential role in the overall process of acquisition.)

Finally, another position often proposed informally is that children learn language when they go to nursery school and kindergarten, hence from their teachers. But children arrive there already talking, often talking rather a lot. So they must already have been working on the early stages of what they need to do to learn a language in their first two or three years. The question is how much they already know by age 3 or 4, and how they got there.

In this book, we will focus instead on the kinds of interactions that adults and babies take part in from birth on, and the critical role these interactions play in the acquisition of language by young children. Children learn their first language from the speakers around them. Initially, these speakers will generally be the adults looking after them.



But as infants get older, progress to walking, and start producing single words themselves, they also interact with older siblings and peers as well as caregivers. So it is the ambient language that young children acquire. How does their acquisition take place? Do adults tailor their language for young addressees?

### **Early adult–child interaction**

Adults talk to babies from the start, even though they know that babies can't yet understand any language. Despite this, parents and other caregivers interact with infants, and such interactions, the evidence suggests, are helpful and even crucial for the later acquisition of language. For example, parents rely on mutual gaze, looking at babies, catching their eye; they touch them, hold them, and use affective intonation to communicate comfort, soothing, play, and laughter. Two-way interaction typically begins as soon as small babies respond with smiles and mutual gaze. In these early 'exchanges', with little or no communicative content on the babies' side, adults will treat a smile, a look, a burp, or a leg-kick as a 'turn' in an exchange. But both content and timing here differ from later conversational turns and actual turn-taking with language, with both larger gaps between turns and more overlapping of turns.

Parents engage 2-month-olds with smiles and eye-gaze. From the age of 3 months on, infants can participate with adults in what could be called passive joint engagement where the adult follows the infant's gaze. When infants reach 4 months of age, adults can also get them to attend to objects they show to them. This is also about the time when infants also start watching hand motions intently, and motion in general, and actively track adult eye-gaze during interactions. Around 6–8 months, most infants start to babble, and adults will now expect, even demand, babble-sequences as turns contributed by the infant. By 9–10 months, infants readily participate in a variety of exchange games, passing a toy to and fro with an adult, for example, or alternating roles in bouts of peek-a-boo. It is shortly after this that infants typically attempt to produce their first words.

When infants vocalize, they may simply babble in response to adult comments and questions, but from around 11–12 months, they often combine a vocalization with a gesture, where the vocalization may be based on some adult word, as in uses of a syllable like **da** along with a point gesture at some object of interest. When this happens, adults typically respond with a label for the apparent referent. And once young children begin to label things spontaneously, adults typically confirm any label a child has produced, and then expand on it, as in:

*Nicola (1;11.9): nose.*

*Mother:* He's got a pointed nose, hasn't he?

But when children combine a single-word utterance, a label, with a gesture, pointing towards some object, say, or reaching towards some-thing, adults construe this as a request for information or a request with respect to that object, as in:

*Nicky (1;7.29): back, back* <handing plate to Mother>

*Mother:* Do you want me to put it back? There.

That is, adults tend to respond differently to children's word-only utterances compared with how they respond to child utterances that contain a word and gesture combined.

Early on, infants' vocalizations often overlap with adult speech: when they smile, when they produce contented cries, and later when they start to babble. But even with a 3-month-old, adults may impose something like turns-at-talk: first making a comment say, then pausing until the infant does something – kicks, yawns, closes its fists, smiles, blinks, or any other action – and only after that do adults resume their talk, taking another turn. Effectively, adult speakers offer a framework for communicative interaction, and even impose it, long before young children actually start to produce any language or participate communicatively, as in the following exchange:

*Ann (0;3):* <smiles>

*Mother:* Oh what a nice little smile!

Yes, isn't that nice? There.

There's a nice little smile.

*Ann:* <burps>

*Mother:* What a nice wind as well!


Yes, that's better, isn't it?

Yes. Yes.

*Ann:* <vocalizes>

*Mother:* Yes! There's a nice noise.

When adults talk in this way to very young babies, they generally adjust their intonation (the melody of their speech), maybe speak a bit more softly, but don't make any particular adjustments to the content of what they are saying. This content may range from general reflections on the day to talk about activities specific to what the adult is currently doing, e.g. changing or bathing the baby, dressing it, preparing to nurse it. But once very young children display some understanding of a few words, begin trying to



communicate with gestures, vocalizations, and even produce a few words (from around 10 months or so onwards), adults start to modify both the form and the content of their speech as they adjust to their addressee's level, taking into account what very young children appear able to understand and what they can produce.

### **Adults modify their forms of talk**


One reason adults adjust their speech as they talk with very young children is to take into account how much infants understand. But adults, sensibly, don't bother to make any adjustments until they see some evidence of comprehension in their children. This typically doesn't happen until around age 10–12 months.

Since children understand so few words at first, adults modify how they talk with young children. They slow down, a lot; they produce very short utterances, they pause between utterances, they use exaggerated intonation contours with a wide pitch range (around two octaves in English speakers, compared to under one octave in talk to other adults), and they wait longer for children to respond, waiting much longer than they would in conversation with an adult. They make these modifications because they are designing their utterances for inexperienced, beginning speakers.

Adults also consistently adjust the *forms* of language they use to the child's apparent level of understanding. Besides their exaggerated-sounding intonations, they use higher pitch than in speech to adults; and they produce short utterances, very short compared to when they talk with older children and adults. They articulate what they say clearly; they make very few speech errors – and hence very few repairs to their own speech, and they consistently pause *between* utterances rather than *within* utterances as in adult-to-adult talk. They also readily repeat their utterances, with variations in word order but with much the same content. In short, adult speakers design what they say so it works for addressees who, as yet, know very little about the language or how to use it.

### **Adults modify the content of their talk**

Adults don't just modify the *forms* they use in talking, they also modify the *content* of what they say. When they talk to young children, they do this by choosing their words and their topics. For example, they focus mainly on the here-and-now, offering comments about objects that are physically present and visible to both adult and child, about what is currently happening, about who or what they can both see, and about any changes that are occurring in the scene before their eyes. This focus on the



here-and-now places limits on the referents children need to be able to identify when they hear unfamiliar words and expressions. Once they have established joint attention with the adult speaker, their shared focus on the here-and-now helps them 'map' some meaning to unfamiliar word-forms as they identify an unfamiliar referent in context.

Adults attend not only to children's early words but also to their gestures. One-year-olds' pointing gestures are generally taken as an expression of interest or attention, and hence as antecedents to later verbal declarations or assertions. Adults here typically provide a label for the object pointed to, as in the adult 'It's a bear'. But when 1-year-olds instead extend an object towards the adult, adults are likely to take this kind of gesture as a request for help – for instance, help in opening a container with a toy inside, or in winding up a toy, to which adults might respond with 'You want help?' or 'I'll do it'. That is, pointing tends to elicit labels, while reaching towards or extending an object to the adult elicits offers of help and actions that help, from the adult.


In talking with young children, adults repeat themselves a lot. They do this, for example, when they make a request, with slight variations in the form of the request, until they elicit an appropriate response. Such repetitions give children more opportunities – and more time – to work out what is being asked for, and to plan a response. At the same time, of course, the sequence of adult utterances that gets repeated on such occasions serves to display some of the forms that a request can take.

*Adult:* Pick up the blocks. Put the blocks into the box.  
Put the red blocks away, put them into the box.

Such repetitions also turn up in adults' uses of a label new to the child. In one study, adults offered new labels nearly six times each on average to 1-year-olds, compared to just twice to young 3-year-olds. Adults sometimes rely on 'variation sets', as in the following series of questions designed to prompt the memory of a child aged 2;3 (2 years and 3 months):

*Adult:* Who did we see when we went out shopping today?  
Who did we see?  
Who did we see in the store?  
Who did we see today?  
When we went out shopping, who did we see?

Such variation sets rely on alternative wording to express the same intention in a



variety of ways, substituting different words, and rephrasing questions with additions or deletions, as well as some reordering of information. In one case study of Turkish acquisition, researchers found that variation sets comprised about 20 per cent of the mother's speech to her child between the ages of 1;8 and 2;3. On average, this particular mother produced six variations in a set, with word order varied each time.

Similarly, when parents make requests of their children, they frequently go on repeating the request, in alternative forms, until the children comply. Parents may do this in an attempt to find a version their children understand, or they may do it on the assumption that young children take time to process verbal information (here, a request) so reiterating a request gives them more time to respond.

Parents also frequently repeat forms as a lead-in to elicit information they expect the child to have, generally using test questions rather than true questions, as in:

*Mother:* Here's the cow. <Mother looks at block>  
Here's the cow. <Mother pushes block towards child>  
What does the cow say? <Mother stops block in front of child>

Adult reliance on repetitions like this seems to be designed to make sure children will eventually work out what the adult wants them to attend to, or to do, on that occasion. Adults also try to get children to produce appropriate information for others and may spend considerable time trying to get them to do this. (We return to this issue later, in Chapter 4.)

### **Adults scaffold early child contributions**

Once children can take turns with single words, adults offer scaffolding or framing to support these turns. They may remind the child of an event ('Do you remember when ...?'), and then pause to let the child contribute a relevant word or comment. In doing this, adult and child actively collaborate in recounting the episode. Adult scaffolding or framing supports child contributions, and provides a prompt for the child when adult and child collaborate in retelling a story to someone else. The precise framing given depends on the knowledge of the event that is shared by adult and child.

*D* (1;6.11, being encouraged to tell Father about episode where Philip, aged 10, let out his budgerigar and it landed on D's head)

*Mother:* Did you see Philip's bird? Can you tell Herb?

*D:* head. head. head.

*Mother:* What landed on your head?  
*D:* bird.

When children begin to produce longer utterances and become more skilled at taking turns, adults reduce the amount of framing they offer.

*Sophie (3;0):* why – why do me have to put one slide in?  
*Father:* Keep the hair out of your face. Otherwise it's all over you.  
Here. <playing Snakes and Ladders> There's some more counters.  
Will you pass me that green counter?  
*Sophie:* which green counter?

Although adults reduce the amount of scaffolding or framing as their children get older, they continue to expand their children's utterances, not only adding in missing pieces, but also adding information relevant to whatever the child is talking about.

### **Adults expand their children's utterances**

When adults expand on what their children say, adding elements that are missing, they typically add other information too, sometimes in the form of questions, as in:


*Brenda (1;7):* /haidi/ [= hiding]  
*Adult:* Hide? What's hiding?  
*Brenda:* /brù/ [= balloon]  
*Adult:* Oh, the balloon. Where? Where is it? Where is it?  
*Brenda:* /haidin/

Or simply in the form of an expansion on the child's utterance, with the addition of a conventional label for the entity being talked about.

*Child (2;3):* that climbing.  
*Adult:* That's for climbing and it's called a ladder.

Expansions like these, along with the rest of what adults say in talk with their children, provide young children with still further exposure to how one conveys specific meanings – the words to use, the grammatical elements and word endings needed, and the ordering of words and any grammatical elements in each utterance.

### **Adults offer new words**




Adults often offer their children words they know their children don't yet know. But they don't just offer new words on their own. They tend to flag words as new by introducing them in frequent fixed frames such as *This is –*, *That's –*, *These are called–*. And they often follow up their offers with general information about the referent – about its class membership (the kind of thing it is), about certain parts and properties, relevant functions, ontogeny, and habitat, as in these typical examples:

- A seal is an animal. [inclusion in a class]
- That's a bird, bird with a big beak. [part]
- Those are cobblestones. That's a street made out of stones. [property]
- That stool is for sitting on. [function]
- A lamb is a baby sheep. [ontogeny]
- It's called an eel. It lives in the water. [habitat]

In short, adults not only offer new words, they typically introduce them with a deictic (pointing) expression (*this/that is a –*), a deictic combined with *is called* (*these are called –*) or a prefatory question like *What is that called? It's a –*. And they provide information about the category-type just labelled. This kind of information allows children to relate the meaning of a new word to other words they already know – for instance, other words for animals, toys, foods, vehicles, and, for some 4-year-old enthusiasts, dinosaurs.

It is just such added information that enables children to start constructing semantic domains or semantic fields, sets of words related to each other in meaning. The relation between words can be one of membership or inclusion, as in *That's a ladle. It's a kind of spoon*. It can specify whole and part, usually in that order, as in *That's a rabbit and there's its tail*. Or it can specify some other property, as in *Those guinea pigs have long fur*, or *That ball is made of leather*. The relation can specify function, as in *The wheels make it move*, or *The key is for locking the box*. It can specify habitat, as in *Heron's nest in trees*, or *Deer live in the forest*. And it can give information about ontogeny, as in *Horses have foals*, *cows have calves*, *sheep have lambs*. Sometimes this information comes in lists of related entities, with the new word given last, as in: *A zebra, an elephant, a monkey, a lion, and a LEOPARD*, or *A spoon, a knife, a ladle, and a WHISK*. Or occasionally adults may give a dictionary-like definition, as in *A picnic is when you eat your lunch outside on the grass*.

Another source of information about semantic fields and semantic relations among words is where certain kinds of talk occur. Adults use some words much more often in some physical locations than in others. Inside a house, for example, they use words for kinds of food, for cooking, and for utensils and pans, with greater frequency in the



kitchen than in any other rooms. In the bathroom, they make frequent use of words related to having a bath (e.g. *tap/faucet, water, spray, soap, toy duck, flannel/face-cloth, clean, dirty*), and in the bedroom, terms for morning and evening routines that involve waking, dressing, terms for clothing, pyjamas, covers, sleeping, and so on. And in the front hall, they talk about outdoor clothes (e.g. *coat, shoes, boots, scarf, mittens, and hat*). The words adults offer, in short, are relevant to the customary activities associated with particular places and routines. The added information adults provide relates word meanings to each other, and helps children organize their growing vocabularies into semantic domains. The added information also links words across domains. This helps children establish not only what a new word can refer to in the world, but also what its meaning or sense is. (We return to the reference-sense distinction in Chapters 3 and 4.)

### **Adults provide feedback**


By talking with children, adults offer them opportunities both to *discover* the forms of language and to hear how these are *used* for communication. Adults also contribute feedback on what their children say, and how they say it, along with opportunities for practice in using language. Adult feedback takes several forms. It may consist of offering children the right words to use in context, telling them, for example, how to ask for a toy from an older child, or how to greet a relative. In other cases, it may focus on their own understanding of exactly what their children intended to say: that is, they check up on what children mean to say when they make errors.

These errors could be mistakes in pronunciation, which can obscure the target words intended; mistakes in the shapes of words and their endings (in their morphology), as when children produce a present-tense verb (e.g. *bring*) in lieu of its past-tense form (*brought*), or a singular verb form (*he runs*) in place of a plural one (*they run*); mistakes in word-choice (e.g. calling a lighthouse a *farm*), or mistakes in the syntactic construction (e.g. *those fall down from me*). When children make such errors, adults typically check up on what they mean by initiating a side sequence, where they query what the child means by using a conventionally worded utterance with rising intonation, as in:

*Ben (1;11.25): hat.*

*Mother: She has a hat on?*

And children often take up the ‘corrected version’ in their next turn, as they accept the adult interpretation or clarify their meaning, as in:



*Child (1;11): play that.*  
*Mother: You're going to play with that?*  
*Child: Mummy, you play that.*

On occasion, the child's intended meaning may take more negotiation and require several turns to establish, as in:

*Abe (2;5.7): the plant didn't cried.*  
|| *Father: the plant cried?*  
|| *Abe: no.*  
*Father: Oh. the plant didn't cry*  
*Abe: uh-huh.*

On other occasions, adults may use an embedded correction, where they replace the child error in word-form or word-choice with a conventional adult form, again as they check, with rising intonation, on whether this was the meaning the child intended, as in:

*Philippe (2;1.26): les mettre dans le garage* ('put them in the garage')  
*Adult: Il faut les mettre dans le garage?* ('You have to put them in the garage?')  
*Philippe: **faut** les mettre dans le garage.* ('have to put them in the garage')


Or adults may simply offer implicit corrections – and conventional labels – in their next utterance, as in:

*Mother: And do you know what this is? <points at page>*  
*Christina (1;7.7): /dʌt/ [= cat] <child then points at page too>*  
*Mother: That's another cat. But that's a different kind of cat.*  
*It's a cub. It's a baby lion.*

And children often take up some or all of the conventional forms offered this way, as in Abe's uptake of the phrase *on it*:

*Abe (2;5.10): I want butter mine.*  
*Father: OK give it here and I'll put butter on it.*  
*Abe: I need butter **on it**.*

This kind of feedback is quite extensive, with adults following up between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of child errors up to around age 3;6, in middle- and upper-class speakers of English and French. The reformulations adults offer are the outcome of their checking on just what their children meant, something that is often obscured



when children make errors in what they say. However, adult feedback does not necessarily take the same form across social classes within a culture, or across cultures. Differences in child-rearing practices have a major influence on the forms of adult feedback actually offered in communicative interactions.

In many societies, including the K'iché Maya, adults do not rely on high pitch or exaggerated intonation contours in speaking to young children. This is because high pitch marks respect and is used for addressing high-status adults. But pitch can play a slightly different role in marking a special child-relevant register, as in Papua New Guinea, where Kaluli-speaking adults often 'speak for the child', using a special high nasal melody. So until there are more data on the options for offering feedback in different cultures and social settings, we cannot assume that any particular form of feedback is universal. What does seem to be general is that children do receive feedback on their usage in some form during the period when they are acquiring a first language.

### **Adults ask children questions**

Adults continually ask young children questions. Many of these are *yes/no* questions. These amount to around 40 per cent of questions asked before age 3;6. *Yes/no* questions are easier to answer than *Wh* questions, since the addressee has only to agree or disagree with their content. *Wh* questions pose a harder problem because children have to come up with an answer themselves. In answering a *What* question, they need to retrieve the appropriate label from memory (if they know it); for a *Where* question, they need to recall the location of the object being sought. And in each case, they need time to formulate an answer. Adults start out asking only *What* and *Where* questions, typically about objects in the here-and-now, so these are often not yet true questions.

Adults generally use *What* questions to elicit object labels from children, and their frequent *Where* questions, for example, in such settings as the identify-a-body-part routine: 'Where's your nose?', 'Where's your mouth?', 'Where're your toes?', etc. Only later do *What* and *Where* questions become true information-seeking questions. At age 2 or so, children display little or no comprehension of questions beginning with *Who*, *Which*, *Why*, or *When*. Adults add these other *Wh* question types as children get older and become more consistent in giving evidence that they understand a specific question type by answering appropriately. Not surprisingly, adults tend to ask only the kinds of questions their children can answer, but they start asking harder questions as soon as children display more comprehension and begin to make use of more elaborate



utterances.


### **Joint attention, physical co-presence, and conversational co-presence**

Adults tend to talk with young children about the here-and-now. They label nearby visible objects and actions; they describe the properties and functions of those objects; and they comment on events they are currently involved in. One issue for young children is how to identify the intended referents in such talk. The solution, it seems, is that adults talk about what is *in joint attention*, what is being attended to by both adult and child on that occasion. Adults establish joint attention with children either by following in on what their children are already attending to, or by attracting and then holding their children's attention on some object or event. What is in that shared locus of attention, then, provides the most likely referent or referents for any adult referring expressions (e.g. *that dog, the tree over there, your cup*) produced on that occasion. This helps children 'solve' the relation of word form and word meaning (this is called the mapping problem) as they begin to attach meanings to unfamiliar words. (We will return to this mapping problem in Chapter 3.)

In talking about the here-and-now, adults focus primarily on whatever is *physically* present in joint attention. And they make use, where possible, of terms already familiar to their children along with any new words. Familiar words help children build on their knowledge of what any unfamiliar words might mean on those occasions, in those contexts. In doing this, adults rely not only on language but on gaze, gestures, stance, and general orientation to the entity or activity being talked about. In labelling instances of new categories unfamiliar to the child, they typically point at the object as they label it. And, for example, they offer labels for whole objects before they attempt to label parts of those objects or offer connecting links to other words.

### **Summary**

Adults adjust how they talk to children, with their adjustments tailored to what children can understand and say. This is particularly useful for young children who have to master the sound system of the language, and so learn to get the pronunciation of their words right. Children also have to build up a vocabulary for talking about the objects and events around them. They have to add the right word endings (part of the morphology of the language) along with any small grammatical words like *the, of, or in*, to the words they produce, and they have to choose appropriate constructions (the syntactic options in the language).



Adults adjust both the form and content of their utterances, and the adjustments they make change as children show they understand and begin to produce more language. Adults don't make such adjustments only for young children: they adjust how they say things for all their addressees. They take account of common ground (based on prior conversations and interactions); they take account of the current perspective on an event (reflected in their choice of words: *the dog* versus *that animal*, *the cars* versus *the polluters*), and they attend to existing referential pacts, to what they have called that object on previous occasions when talking to that addressee. With young children, adults are dealing with beginning-speakers who, as yet, know very little language, and therefore need more expert adult speakers to take into account their state of development and general knowledge as they talk with them.

Adults also check up on what their children intended to say, especially when children make errors in how they say things. This checking-up in middle- and upper-class Western communities takes the form of a reformulation of what the child apparently wanted to say, but the adult version is conventional and grammatically complete, and so offers the child a possible model, provided the adult got the intention right. Children respond to reformulations by repeating some or all of what was 'corrected', by acknowledging the adult's interpretation with *uh-huh*, *mm*, or *yeah*, or by forging ahead with the next turn – thereby tacitly accepting the adult's interpretation. This kind of feedback plays an important role in offering children an immediately contrasting version right after they have made some kind of error. It adds targeted information about the language being acquired, information tailored to the child's immediately preceding utterance.

## Further Reading

For a limited time, we've made the following related journal articles completely free-to-view! Just click the links below:

- "Interaction and Language Acquisition in Early Childhood," from *WORD*
- "Understanding Children's Non-Standard Spoken English: A Perspective from Variationist Sociolinguistics," from *Language and Education*
- "Literacy and Language: New Developments in Research, Theory and Practice," from *Early Child Development and Care*