Course Summary

This course is a general overview of topics and theories in language acquisition. Students will learn about many of the specific questions of interest to acquisition researches, including how speech perception and production develop over the first few years of life, how children learn words, how they make generalizations about linguistic structure, and how first language acquisition differs from second language acquisition and bilingualism.

In addition to learning about the current state of scientific knowledge on these topics, we will compare several different theoretical and methodological approaches to studying language acquisition. We will consider the class ‘nature vs. nurture’ question by examining both traditional and generativist approaches and more recent usage based models. Along the way, students will also learn about common experimental paradigms in acquisition research; this knowledge will be incorporated into a final paper (see below), where students will be asked to propose an original study related to any topic touched upon during the course.

Readings

There is no textbook for this course. Readings will be a combination of book chapters and scientific journal articles, all of which will be posted on bSpace. The book chapters are intended to give a more digestible overview of the topics we will cover in class, while the journal articles will expose students to original scientific research and may be more of a challenge. Students will be expected to complete the assigned readings before coming to class, and to prepare questions for clarification and discussion.

Grades

The course grade will be out of 300 points, broken down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homework assignments</td>
<td>200 pts</td>
<td>(67%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>25 pts</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>25 pts</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>50 pts</td>
<td>(17%)</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>300 pts</strong></td>
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Homework assignments. Students will complete (approximately) one homework assignment per week, for the first four weeks of the course. Homework will mostly be in the format of short answer questions, e.g. give summaries of certain aspects of the reading assignments, give informed opinions on ‘hot topic’ issues. Some True/False questions may be included to provide a check on basic understanding. Additionally, each week students will pose an original research question related to that week’s subject material, along with a brief explanation of what the answer would tell us about language acquisition.

Participation. Students must come to class prepared to discuss the readings. This does not mean that you will have perfectly understood or memorized everything in the readings; rather, you should jot down important points and/or clarification questions as you read, and be prepared to discuss these with group members. There will be several opportunities for group work each week, and your ability to contribute to group discussions (this includes regular attendance) will determine your participation grade.

Final paper. For the final paper, students will select one of the original research questions they have proposed in their weekly assignments (or come up with a new question) and expand on it in a short (1-3 page) paper. The paper should explain 1) why the question is of interest to the field of language acquisition, 2) what type of experiment would be suitable to address the question, and 3) what the answer would tell us about language acquisition. Class time will be devoted to discussion of the proposed research questions during the last week of class, so that students may receive feedback before their final write-ups are due.

Final exam. The final exam will take place on the last day of class, and will be worth the same number of points as a normal homework assignment. Whereas the final paper is intended to develop critical scientific reasoning skills, the final exam will be more focused on factual information covered during the course.

Grading policies. You are welcome to work on your assignments in groups. However, you must write up your own work and list any collaborators on your assignment. Cheating and plagiarism will be taken very seriously, and may be cause for failing and/or higher level disciplinary action. Late assignments will be penalized: 5 points if turned in later than the beginning of class on their due date, and 10 points per full day late.

Homework will be graded by two anonymous graders. If you choose to dispute a homework grade, your assignment will be given to the other grader and re-graded, and you will receive the second score. Note that this may result in your score being raised, lowered, or not changed at all. I am happy to discuss the content of assignments during office hours, but in the interest of fairness, I will not adjust individual scores.
I reserve the right to curve the final grades. If there is a curve, the median score will be set to a B, and no one’s scores will be curved down. That is, if you earn 89% of the total points, you will get at least an 89% in the class.

**Detailed Schedule** (may be adjusted)

*Readings are listed on the day we will be discussing them – please complete them before coming to class!*

**Unit 1: Overview of relevant issues**

**Note:** sign up for a time to participate in the word segmentation study this week!

7/8  
*What is language acquisition? What does it mean to acquire a language?*

7/9  
*What exactly has to be acquired? Multiple levels of linguistic structure.*

Clark, Chapter 1

7/10  

Chomsky (1965), pp. 3 – 37

*HW #1 Introduced*
**Unit 2: Speech perception and production in infancy**

**7/16**  *Inferring phonetic categories: introducing statistical learning.*
Ambridge and Lieven, Chapter 2, pp. 13 – 31
Maye, Werker, and Gerken (2002)

*HW #1 Due*

**7/17**  *From sounds to words: word segmentation.*
Ambridge and Lieven, Chapter 2, pp. 31 – 47
Saffran, Aslin, and Newport (1996)

**7/18**  *Early speech production. Babbling, changes in vocal anatomy.*
Ambridge and Lieven, Chapter 2, pp. 47 - 60

*HW #2 Introduced*

**7/22**  *The perception/production link.*
Kuhl and Meltzoff (1996)

**Unit 3: Words and sentences**

**7/23**  *Learning labels for things. Do innate biases help with word learning?*
Ambridge and Lieven, Chapter 3, pp. 61 – 83

**7/24**  *Word learning 2: generalizing category labels.*
Smith (1999), pp. 277 – 304

*HW #2 Due*

**7/25**  *Generalizing linguistic structure: from words to syntactic categories.*

**7/29**  *Is grammar separate from the lexicon? Words and Rules, Universal Grammar*
Pinker (2001)
Ambridge and Lieven, Chapter 6, pp. 119 – 123

**7/30**  *Learnability of grammar, Part 1*
Bates and Elman (1996)
Letters to Science (1997)

*HW #3 Introduced*
Unit 4: Second language acquisition and bilingualism

8/5  What does it mean to be a native speaker? What’s different about bilingualism?
     Clark, Chapter 14

     HW #3 Due

8/6  The bilingual lexicon
     Byers-Heinlein and Werker (2013)

     HW #4 Introduced

8/7  Comparing bilinguals with L1 and L2 learners, Part 1
     Kroll, Bogulski, and McClain (2012), pp. 1 – 9

8/8  Comparing bilinguals with L1 and L2 learners, Part 2
     Kroll, Bogulski, and McClain (2012), pp. 9 – 20

8/12 Bilingualism and general cognitive processes.
     Bialystok (2009)

     HW #4 Due

Wrap-up

8/13 Review and final paper discussions.

8/14 Review and final paper discussions.

8/15 Final exam (in class).

8/16  (No class)
     Final papers due by 5:00 pm.
Bibliography


