

INX 199 Spring Term Projects

This handout lists some ideas for possible projects for the spring term. You are not required to pick one of these suggestions, but you must choose a topic that is focused on language acquisition. You should pick a topic that you are keen to work on, and will lend itself to a good term paper as well as an interesting class presentation. Your term project can be comprised of a research paper only, or of a research project (using CHILDES) plus research paper combination. In the case of the latter, a portion of the paper will describe your data analysis and findings. The precise allocation between data description and analysis and research paper content will depend on the project you choose, and should be discussed with me. In both cases (research paper, or research project plus paper), the report you turn in should be about 12 pages, 1½ spacing, 12 pt font, ¾ inch margins.

On January 18th (the second class of the spring term), the proposal for your term project will be due. You will need to describe precisely the topic you plan to work on (about ½ page), and you should have a preliminary bibliography of sources (about ½ page). (You can only use internet sources as general information; you must have some scholarly sources in the form of scholarly books or book chapters, journals [*Journal of Child Language* or *Child Development*, e.g.], or other scholarly media.) I will return your proposal on January 25th with feedback that either it is approved as is, or you need to meet with me to finalize it.

Research paper presentations will begin on March 8th and continue through April 5th, with 3-4 presentations per class period. On March 1st there will be a tutorial on PowerPoint to help you with your presentation.

A. Some Ideas for Possible Research Paper Topics:

1. A fuller, deeper analysis of the issues in defining exactly what comprises the language faculty in children – precisely what is innate that enables the acquisition of language in all normally functioning children?
2. An analysis of the relation of evolution of language in the species, to the acquisition of language by children. What do these issues say about what's innate and what's not? What about the role of gesture in spoken language? Is there any evidence about evolution of language that would explain some of the ease or difficulty children have in learning language?
3. An analysis of the relation between general cognitive development and language learning. What is the relation between learning of conceptual categories and word learning? What other aspects of cognitive development does language acquisition depend on?
4. A view on language acquisition from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience. What is the connection between brain structures and language learning? What kind of language disorders can arise in children? How can other cognitive disorders influence acquisition of language?
5. A review of the acquisition of some aspect of language that we have not covered in the course (in which we've primarily focused on word learning). For example, how do

children segment speech, discover meaningful sound units, determine what's a word? How do children acquire syntax beyond word ordering? How do they acquire complex morphology, especially in more morphologically rich languages than English? You might also tackle any of these issues within the scope of a project using CHILDES, e.g., by examining data across multiple children of the same age, or a single child at different ages.

6. A more thorough analysis of any of the special topics we address in the first half of the spring term: bilingualism, learning of language by the great apes, etc.

B. Some Ideas for Paper Topics Including a Research Project Component on CHILDES:

1. Determine whether the use of diminutives or the use of other affectively marked words are indicative of a particular parental interactional style. Select several parents who use affectively marked words frequently and those who use them rarely. Choose a small set of sentence types (e.g., imperatives, expansions) that may differentiate the degree to which parents seek to control behaviour and conversation versus encourage interaction and conversation. Is there any association between the use of affectively marked terms and parental interaction style? Are there gender differences, either among parents of different sexes, or toward children of different sexes? How do such usages change over time?
2. Investigate the use of superordinate category words (such as animal or toy) compared to subordinates (such as dog or puppet). Select the transcripts for some children and their caregivers to examine. How frequently do superordinate terms occur in natural conversation between the child and caregiver? Does the frequency increase as the child gets older? Does the child use superordinates more often than the caregiver, or mostly mostly what they hear? Does the caregiver say things that would help the child learn superordinates? Can the child's use of superordinates be related to any more general change in cognitive development, for example, the development of general classification abilities? You could also investigate other classes of words in a similar way, such as adjectives that refer to emotions or feelings, like hungry, sleepy, happy, angry, sad, and surprised, or verbs that refer to mental activities, like think, worry, wonder, doubt, and consider.
3. If middle-class English-speaking mothers restrict their vocabulary choice by adjusting their speech to the child's object-naming level, then we hypothesize that all mothers would produce very similar speech, in the form of a core lexicon, when addressing children of the same age in the same situation. Is there a core vocabulary used by mothers when speaking to 2-year-olds in a given situation? To what extent do mothers share one another's vocabulary? Which words are shared by a majority of the mothers and why? What percentage of maternal input is composed of the core vocabulary? What is the composition and function of the core vocabulary? Compare the core

vocabulary used by a mother and her child, and that used by the father and the same child. Investigate how much children share their mothers' vocabulary. Is the percentage similar among all children?

4. Do parents provide (implicit or explicit) negative evidence to children by responding differentially to their well-formed and ill-formed utterances? Examine a sample of children's responses to the preceding caregiver utterances, and determine if children use caregiver feedback to correct their speech, considering both immediate and long-term effects. Are there age differences? Gender differences (of caregiver or child)?
5. Imitation is defined as any attempt by the child to repeat partially or completely previous parental speech. What is the average rate of imitation for children in a sample, and differences in individual children's tendencies to imitate? Does the rate of imitation decrease with age? Do high imitators produce more exact or more reduced imitations than low imitators? What kind of imitation is most prevalent in high imitators? Do all high imitators perform in similar ways? Do imitative utterances have a greater MLU than nonimitative utterances? Does this depend on the type of imitative utterance? Can we conclude that imitation in language development is grammatically progressive?
6. Evaluate the proposal that young children who do not observe the adult grammar of reflexives in English fail to do so because they misclassify reflexives as "genitives + self". Is there evidence in the spontaneous production data that supports this hypothesis? For production data that does support this hypothesis, what triggers children's eventual re-analysis of reflexives? Further study young children's hypotheses about English reciprocals such as "each other". Investigate how young children acquire English reciprocals. Try to reach a descriptive generalization about their distribution in early child language.
7. Devise a hypothesis about language acquisition of your own choosing (e.g., you might want to look at a broader use of inflection and grammatical markers; complexity of utterance; social/pragmatic functions used by children; etc.). You may either perform a manual analysis of a sample of CHILDES data, or you may code a linguistic feature or features of your choice in the transcripts and save the re-coded transcripts. Perform an analysis of the (original or re-coded) transcripts using the FREQ program as well as other CLAN analysis tools.
8. You may also do this type of research with an actual child or children that you know. You would need to formulate a precise hypothesis and a practical methodology. For example, in addition to the kinds of issues raised above, you might ask children of different ages what they think are the meaning(s) of some ambiguous words, or you might work with children you know to imitate some of the experimental conditions such as the wug-test, or question elicitation (to see if they know how to form different kinds of questions), to see what kind of responses you get.