Language Acquisition & Cognitive Development

V89.0300.009
Wednesdays, 2:00 – 3:50 PM, Meyer 851
Professor Gary Marcus
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office hours: by appointment (email to set up a time)

In the first three years of life, children go from helpless creatures, fresh out of the womb, to toddlers with a basic grasp of language and the people and objects in the world around them. How do they do that? This seminar will discuss current issues in language acquisition and cognitive development, exploring nature, nurture, and their interaction.

Requirements

• Class participation & regular attendance

• Frequent short essays (1 page each) — 30% of grade

• Two seminar presentations — 20% of grade

• Seminar participation — 10% of grade

• Paper 10-15 pages; outlines and/or excerpts will also be required — 40% of grade

Paper:
Topic Due: October 7
Outline/Excerpt Due: November 18
Final Draft: December 16
Preliminary Calendar

September 9, 2009: Introduction

September 16, 2009: Word Learning


Assignment (due in class): Read the article by Bloom and skim through the commentaries. Choose one of the commentaries and write 1-2 page essay on what that commentary says and how it relates to what Bloom says. Be prepared to talk about your essay in class, and what sorts of experiments you could do to resolve the dispute.

September 23, 2009: What makes language acquisition a challenging problem? What makes studying language acquisition a challenging problem?


Assignment: Find a study on language acquisition that’s been published in the last three years, explain what method it uses, and say whether you think that method is appropriate. Prepare to discuss in class.

September 30, 2009: Speech & Statistics


Assignment: TBA

October 7, 2009: Rules


Elman, et al, excerpt TBA

Assignment: TBA

**October 14, 2009: The Acquisition of Syntax**


Assignment: Read the article by Crain and skim through the commentaries. Choose one of the commentaries and write 1-2 page essay on what that commentary says and how it relates to what Crain says. Be prepared to talk about your essay in class, and what sorts of evidence could resolve the dispute

**October 21, 2009: Syntactic Bootstrapping**


Assignment: TBA

**October 28, 2009: Second Language Acquisition & Invented Languages**


Assignment: TBA

**November 4, 2009 Object Permanence & Number**

Assignment: TBA

**November 11, 2009  Intuitive psychology and Theory of mind**

Articles on autism, TBA. (Daniel Tammet?)

**November 18, 2009  paper topic workshop.**

No readings, but....

Assignment: Prepare a 5 minute discussion of your prospective final paper: what’s the main idea in your paper? What sources will you use? What are the important open questions in the area of research you will be discussing? Where are you stuck?

**November 25, 2009  Turkey physiology and behavior**

Assignment: Dissection, subject to dietary preferences.

**December 2, 2009  Concepts, Causality & Biology**


**December 9, 2009  Class Presentations**