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978-0-521-76804-7 - Child Language Acquisition: Contrasting Theoretical Approaches
Ben Ambridge and Elena V. M. Lieven

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Child Language Acquisition

Contrasting Theoretical Approaches

Is children's language acquisition based on innate linguistic structures or built from cognitive and communicative skills? This book summarizes the major theoretical debates in all of the core domains of child language acquisition research (phonology, word learning, inflectional morphology, syntax and binding) and includes a complete introduction to the two major contrasting theoretical approaches: generativist and constructivist. For each debate, the predictions of the competing accounts are closely and even-handedly evaluated against the empirical data. The result is an evidence-based review of the central issues in language acquisition research that will constitute a valuable resource for students, teachers, course-builders and researchers alike.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521745239

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First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Ambridge, Ben, 1977–

Child language acquisition : contrasting theoretical approaches / Ben Ambridge,
Elena V. M. Lieven.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-76804-7 (hardback)

1. Children – Language. 2. Language acquisition. 3. Language arts (Early
childhood) 4. Verbal ability in children. I. Lieven, Elena V. M. II. Title.

P118.A47 2011

401'.41 – dc22 2010048067

ISBN 978-0-521-76804-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-74523-9 Paperback

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Preface

How do children acquire their native language? This question has prompted a lively theoretical debate and a great deal of empirical research, much of which explicitly tests the predictions of the various competing accounts. In our view, it is therefore unfortunate that most previous child language textbooks and monographs barely cover this debate at all. Instead, most authors, whether implicitly or explicitly, adopt a particular theoretical position and largely discuss only research conducted within the relevant paradigm. If proposals that derive from an opposing theoretical viewpoint are discussed at all, it is generally only to dismiss them, with no serious consideration of their strengths and weaknesses.

We want to change all that with this textbook. Our goal is to identify the key debates in each of what we consider to be the ‘core’ domains in language acquisition (by monolingual, typically-developing speakers) and to outline the empirical evidence for and against each theoretical proposal, in an even-handed, systematic and (as far as space permits) comprehensive manner. We aim to hold every proposal to an equally high standard of proof – making no prior assumptions with regard to parsimony or psychological plausibility – and, in so doing, to provide detailed challenges to all researchers, of all theoretical standpoints.

This focus on theoretical debates has three important consequences. The first is that, although we seek to be comprehensive in covering all the major domains of acquisition (speech perception/segmentation and production, word learning, inflectional morphology and syntax), this textbook does not constitute a descriptive account of what children’s language looks like at each age (there are many other textbooks that fulfil this function). Whilst the reader will, nevertheless, build up a detailed picture of the timecourse of key acquisition phenomena, areas which have attracted rather less theoretical debate are not covered.

The second consequence of our theoretically oriented approach is that when selecting studies to include, we have focused, as far as possible, on quantitative experimental or naturalistic-data studies that have been published in peer-reviewed journals, and that include appropriate statistical analyses. Whilst descriptive accounts of children’s language (in terms of one or other theory

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of adult linguistics) play an important role in the development of theories of language acquisition, they are generally not an appropriate basis on which to compare competing theoretical accounts (which, for the most part, make precise quantitative predictions).

The final consequence of organizing this textbook around theoretical debates is that it is relatively modular in its structure. Each chapter covers a particular domain of language acquisition, meaning that readers who are interested in a particular topic will be able to ‘dip in’ at the relevant chapter. The internal structure of each chapter is also relatively modular, with each focusing on two, three or four key debates. Our intention is that researchers who are interested in a particular debate will be able to read the relevant section without having to consult the rest of the chapter, and that course leaders can base lectures around individual debates. Whilst the division of language acquisition into a number of relatively self-contained (and inevitably somewhat arbitrary) domains is, of course, artificial, our goal in doing so is to provide an ordered set of topics around which an undergraduate or postgraduate course can be based.

Because the debates are often complicated and draw on a great deal of empirical research, we end each with a summary table that summarizes the evidence for and against each of the proposals (and that will hopefully serve as a useful guide for revision, coursework projects etc.). We certainly do not wish to imply that one can choose between the rival accounts by counting up the relative numbers of ‘for’s and ‘against’s (not least because one critical shortcoming can trump any number of advantages). Rather, these tables reflect the approach that we adopt throughout this book: our aim is not to choose a ‘winner’ in each debate, but simply to bring together the relevant findings, in order to allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. We hope that we have succeeded in our aim to be fair to – and appropriately critical of – researchers from all theoretical persuasions.

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Acknowledgements

We thank the many people who have read and commented on drafts of this book, a reviewer for Cambridge University Press and our students, friends and families. We thank Nicole Lorenz for preparing the author index and Kay McKechnie for copy-editing. Special thanks are due to Siu-Lin Rawlinson for redrawing Figures 8.3, 8.5 and 8.10–8.13 by hand from the originals, at extremely short notice. Ben Ambridge's own research discussed in this book was supported by grants RES-062-23-0931, RES-000-22-1540 and PTA-026-27-0705 from the Economic and Social Research Council; Elena Lieven's by grants RES-000-22-1285, RES-000-23-6393 and RES-000-23-7911 from the Economic and Social Research Council, and by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.