2014 NEWSLETTER

Dear Parents and Teachers,

We have had yet another productive and exciting year, and we owe many thanks to you and your wonderful children for making that happen! Without you and your generosity, our research would not be possible. Thank you from all of us at the Laboratory for Developmental Language Studies!

We are very excited to tell you about some of our favorite studies from this past year. The common themes of our research are children’s acquisition of syntax (structure), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (language usage). Some of our studies focus on how younger children acquire individual words, while others focus on how older children interpret complex sentences that pose a challenge even for adults! Still another line of research investigates how the interaction of two languages influences linguistic understanding in the bilingual child.

One of the most rewarding aspects of our work is that we provide Rutgers students with the opportunity to be engaged in hands-on research from many different angles. Your children’s involvement has allowed our students a unique opportunity to witness language acquisition first hand, and analyze it scientifically. Throughout the year, we present our research at conferences, workshops, and universities, and publish it peer-reviewed journals. These presentations give us an opportunity to share our findings, build bridges among researchers, and allow our undergraduate and graduate students a chance to showcase their contributions.

Again, thank you for being an important part of our research! We couldn’t have done it without you!

Many thanks,
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**Verb Learning**

When a child acquires a new language, she encounters many new words each day. Her task is to find out what each of these words means, and how to combine them to express more complex meaning. How does she accomplish this task? One resource she has at her fingertips is to look at the other words co-occurring with the word whose meaning she is figuring out. For example, if the word is accompanied by words like ‘yummy’, ‘spoon’, ‘mouth’, and ‘bananas,’ it might have something to do with eating.

We have been looking at how children use the linguistic environment to deduce verb meaning, and more specifically, how they can use adverbs to do so. An adverb like ‘together’ can tell a learner that events in the world are taking place at the same time, and that the participants in these events might be coordinating their actions. We have found that this information allows them to decide between videos displaying events such as the following, reliably choosing the one on the left when they hear that the girls are doing something **together**. These findings therefore tell us something about how young children perceive events, and how they see language as mapping on to them.

![Images of children]

**Comparatives**

Humans spend a lot of time making comparisons. We are always trying to figure out which one is bigger, has more, is more expensive, is taller, and so on. What is especially tricky is figuring out how the language you are learning expresses comparisons. Languages don’t all recruit the same strategies for making comparatives. In addition, comparatives involve a combination of linguistic mechanisms for interpretation. It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that children form comparatives in unexpected ways well into six years of age. But does children’s *production* of comparatives accurately reflect their *comprehension* of these structures?
We have been running a series of studies in which we ask children to act out the outcome of a series of short stories with toys. These stories are designed to elicit their interpretation of comparatives, like ‘Nemo gave more presents to Buzz than to Woody’, and even more complicated ones. The twists we add allow us to probe their abstract representations of these structures even more closely. We have been astounded by children’s interpretations of these comparatives, because sometimes they are incredibly adult-like, and other times, they provide responses that we could not have anticipated! These findings are a window into the abstract grammatical mechanisms at work in the young mind, and reveal more about what the process of language development looks like.

**Bilingual Studies**

It was once thought that when a child was acquiring multiple languages, she assembled two different grammars and lexicons, which were maintained distinct from each other – and this made language acquisition more difficult for them. We now know that these languages not only interact, but they can also influence each other in interesting ways. Anyone who speaks multiple languages may have had the experience of mixing languages within a single utterance, or trying to retrieve a word in one language, only to successfully retrieve it in the other! We are interested in how bilingual children manage to assign meaning to words when the languages they are acquiring place different constraints on these words. Our target has been quantificational words like ‘some’.

In an image like the one here, it is true that *some* of the horses ate apples, but that could also be true even if all of them ate apples – even if it’s not the best way to describe that situation. In Spanish, ‘unos’ patterns like ‘some’, but ‘algunos’ means something more, like ‘some but not all,’ and so it could not be used in both situations. We have run a series of studies in Spanish with bilingual children, and adult heritage speakers, comparing what they know about these words, and how English might influence Spanish. These studies allow us to determine how much the context of language usage influences interpretation, and how facile bilingual children are at determining the message a speaker is trying to convey.