

LANGUAGE MATTERS

A Guide to Everyday Questions about Language



DONNA JO NAPOLI

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Language matters

Preface

I've been teaching linguistics since 1973. Newspaper and magazine reporters approach me in that role with questions—ranging all over the board—that often reveal misconceptions about language. We use language in most of our daily interactions with other people, so the types of questions that can arise are at least as varied as the types of situations in which we use language. Here are some examples:

How can we stop our children from using bad grammar?

Why don't we reform English spelling so that the words will be spelled exactly as we all say them?

Isn't it interesting that the Inuit have dozens of words for snow when Americans can't even imagine all those different varieties?

The first question is problematic because the whole notion of good versus bad grammar is problematic. How do we decide whose grammar is good and whose is not? Language changes from one generation to the next, no matter what, and change is simply that—neither improvement nor decline; it is merely change. The second question is based on the assumption that we all pronounce words in the same way. Even within the United States that is false, but certainly, when we look at Canada, England, India, Australia, and other countries where English is one of the national languages, the

falsity of that assumption is obvious. The third question is based on false information: So far as I know, it has never been determined whether or not the Inuit people have dozens of words for snow. Moreover, any active skier in the United States can rattle off descriptions (maybe using multiple words) of many different kinds of snow quality—so we can certainly understand concepts without having single-word labels for them.

When I respond to reporters' questions, sometimes my knowledge of particular languages and of the formal nature of linguistic principles helps me. This is particularly true if their questions are about how language is produced and processed or about particular sociolinguistic facts, such as differences between regional speech patterns. But I am struck by how often these questions could have been answered by anybody who took the time to seriously consider language use. Ordinary speakers have a great deal of knowledge about language, and if they apply common sense in analyzing language, they can debunk many common misconceptions.

Most people, however, have little idea of how to approach language questions. If you want to learn about language in a formal way, I encourage you to pick up a linguistics textbook or to take a linguistics course. But if you want to learn how to look at language issues so that you can make sensible and responsible decisions about language in your daily life, then this book will help you.

The chapters in this book are divided into two parts. Part I deals with language as a human ability. Part II deals with language in the context of society. At the end of each chapter is a list of readings for further consultation, as well as websites that were available when this book was written (in spring 2002). Another wonderful resource is the website of videos on language set up by the Linguistic Society of America: <http://www.uga.edu/lava/Archive.html>.

The chapters invite you into one way of approaching language. They help you to uncover assumptions behind language questions so that you can evaluate them. They help you to recognize what sorts of things might be evidence for or against different positions on a language issue. And they help sort out the evidence in a systematic and methodologically sound way. Although only a dozen issues are addressed in this book, I hope that reading these chapters will give you the confidence to approach other language issues in a systematic way.

The title of each chapter is in question form. I use questions that do not have misconceptions built into them so that readers will not have these false ideas chiseled into their memories. However, each chapter addresses one or more misconceptions.

Linguistics is a field in which reasonable people can and do disagree. Nevertheless, in this book I am rarely equivocal (I'm a linguist, not a politician). But the arguments are laid out step by step, so if you disagree at any point along the way, you can diverge and find your own answers, knowing, at least, what my position is and why.

Acknowledgments

Many people helped me in writing this book. All the reporters and students I've had over the years have influenced me, particularly my students at Swarthmore College in Linguistics 1 in spring 2001. Peter Ohlin, the linguistics editor for Oxford University Press, asked me if I would write this book, then went on to shepherd me through every step along the way. Several anonymous reviewers made wonderful suggestions about every aspect of the book. And I thank Sean Crist, Amy DiBenedetto, Lillie Dremeaux, Barry Furrow, Krista Gigone, Richard Tchen, Jeff Wu, and Chandra Yesiltas for reading drafts and making comments.

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part I

Language: The Human Ability

1

How do we acquire language?

How did you and I learn to speak and understand language? This is a difficult question to approach because even though we've all done it, we can't remember doing it. Acquiring language begins in the womb, and our accessible memories don't go back that far.

Nevertheless, many of us might be willing to attempt an answer. After all, we acquired language, so we must know something about the process. But is this true? We metabolize sugar, but unless we've studied chemistry, we don't know how it's done. It happens naturally; the body does it on its own.

A common misconception is that children need to be taught language. In fact, though, acquiring language happens naturally—just like metabolizing sugar. No one has to teach us; our brain does it on its own. This chapter presents some of the important evidence.

Most of the time we can find evidence in our daily language experience that is relevant in evaluating hypotheses about how language works. One of the purposes of this book is to help you recognize that evidence. Therefore, I hesitate to draw on data that you don't have easy access to. But sometimes relatively inaccessible data can be amazingly helpful, and this is one of those times. We begin by looking at data that you couldn't be expected to have access to if you hadn't studied linguistics. Our goal will be to find out what factors are necessary and/or sufficient for language acquisition to take place.

Let's confront the idea that children need to be taught language in an explicit and conscious way. This is false. There are language communities in which no conscious language teaching goes on, but language acquisition proceeds normally. In Samoa, for example, adults do not view infants and small children as conversational partners, nor do they feel a responsibility to model their speech so that children can more easily learn it. Instead, the children simply overhear speech between adults. Likewise, the adults do not listen to the speech of the children. It's as though the children's talk is not part of the larger language community. Yet the children acquire the language of the larger community just fine and at the same rate that children acquire language all around the world. Conscious language teaching, then, is not necessary for first language acquisition.

A new possibility might come to you (as it often has to my students): Children in these communities must be learning solely by mimicking, so maybe mimicking is sufficient for language acquisition. That idea, however, is also wrong.

There have been instances in which children have grown to adolescence in (almost) complete linguistic deprivation. For example, there is a well-documented case about a child dubbed the Wild Boy of Aveyron. In 1799 a feral boy was found living in the woods of Aveyron in the south of France. His habits included eating off the floor and making noises that resembled canine sounds. All indications were that he had been raised by wild animals. Although Doctor Jean-Marc Itard, an educator who had much success in teaching speech to deaf children (the Wild Boy of Aveyron was not deaf), put years of work into trying to teach him human language, he never acquired more than a small vocabulary, with no sign of a system of rules for putting those words together into sentences.

Another example involves a girl researchers called Genie, who was discovered in 1970 in Los Angeles, living in captive isolation

that limited both her physical activity and linguistic input. At the time of her discovery, she could hardly walk and gave no indication of knowing what speech was. Several researchers worked for years to teach Genie language, but she never progressed beyond an unsystematic stringing together of a few words. In middle age, she stopped talking altogether, and researchers gave up.

There are other cases of children (often raised by depraved adults) who never acquired facility with language. Over and over again, adults (often researchers) taught these children to mimic, but mimicry did not result in language acquisition. Mimicry is not a sufficient means of acquiring language.

These are extreme cases. Most children, although not overtly corrected by their parents when they make linguistic mistakes, are exposed to a tremendous amount of language modeling. Also, most children do a lot of mimicry as part of the process of acquiring language. Nevertheless, overt teaching is not necessary and mimicry is not sufficient. Instead, something else is the crucial factor, and it turns out to be biology.

For a couple of decades a team of researchers in London and Oxford studied members of a British family who exhibited an inherited and rare language disorder. Finally, they found another child, not related, who exhibited the same severe disorder. This led to the discovery in 2001 of a gene, called FOXP2, that is directly involved in language ability. There is no doubt: Language is a biological matter, and humans diverged from chimps and other primate lineages in this regard approximately 4.6 to 6.2 million years ago.

For the past half century, linguists have hypothesized that there is a language mechanism in the brain, an actual physical mechanism, that is responsible for all aspects of language, including learning, processing, and production. This mechanism is probably physiologically discontinuous. That is, it is not a single whole, like a kidney,

liver, or other major organ. Instead, various parts of the language mechanism are located in separate spots in the brain and they work together to produce comprehensive language ability. The failure of the Wild Boy of Aveyron and of Genie to acquire language is taken as evidence that the language mechanism somehow changes at an early age, perhaps the age of five (although who knows for sure, since we cannot ethically do experiments), so the ability to acquire a first language after that critical period is diminished or even erased.

Further evidence for the existence of the language mechanism comes from data on linguistic damage and language pathologies. It's commonly known that strokes can result in severe language loss in a person whose intelligence is otherwise left intact. There are also several other types of damage to the brain that cause particular language impairments, and, significantly, if the site of the damage is known, the symptoms are predictable. For example, damage to the front part of the brain's left hemisphere results in the loss of the ability to use a coherent word order and general sentence structure. The afflicted person produces short and choppy utterances and exhibits a general lack of fluency. This condition is known as Broca's aphasia. Damage to the rear part of the brain's left hemisphere results in the loss of the ability to use words appropriate to meaning, to interpret language, or both. It is known as Wernicke's aphasia. Damage to the brain's entire left hemisphere results in all of these malfunctions and is known as global aphasia. In such instances, damage has been done to different parts of the language mechanism.

Also, there are pathologies linked to congenital problems. For example, children born with spina bifida sometimes experience devastating retardation. Nevertheless, they can articulately recount imagined events (events that never occurred), sounding entirely of normal intelligence when they do so. Here the language mechanism clearly operates independently of the damaged intelligence.

Some children are born with a set of syndromes that have been called Specific Language Impairment. These children do not have abnormal intelligence or any kind of sensory or emotional, social, or behavioral problems. Their problems are concentrated specifically on language issues; they have trouble understanding language and producing well-formed sentences. Again, the language mechanism has a pathology independent of any other brain function.

Once we've concluded that a language mechanism exists in the brain as a physical entity and that it changes over time, the question of how we acquire a first language is similar to the question of how we metabolize sugar in that any biological function has to be studied scientifically to be understood.

I'm now going to present data I have collected on first language acquisition. Some of these data are rather ordinary, but others I sought out to make my point. Although the data are largely anecdotal, in every instance there are studies, based on large data corpuses, that show that these cases are representative of ordinary language acquisition (unless I explicitly say otherwise).

Let's start with newborns. Here's the first scene: A baby fresh from the hospital is in his grandmother's arms, crying continuously. The grandmother, who has flown in from Florida for the occasion, is singing and cooing and cuddling the newborn to her breast. The mother comes through the door and coos as she crosses the room. At the first sound of her voice, the baby's cries turn to gulps that cease by the time the mother reaches him. What is the baby responding to? When the mother first came through the door, she was too far away for him to smell her, and the grandmother is holding him in such a way that his eyes can take in only his grandmother's face and chest. It appears that this newborn recognizes his mother's voice.

At the beginning of this chapter, I claimed that language acquisition starts in the womb. Around the seventh month of ges-

tation, the auditory system is formed and, except in an instance of hearing impairment, functions well enough that fetuses can listen to the world outside the womb. It's not surprising, then, that a (hearing) newborn comes into the world recognizing the voices of his mother and of those people who constantly surround his mother. Surely the newborn is not consciously trying to acquire language. He simply listens to the world, yet already he has learned to pick out certain sounds as relevant to his various needs and wants.

Here's a second scene: I gave a talk to a social club of Korean women living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, all of whom sent their children to Korean school on Saturday to keep the language alive among their children. After the talk, my husband came in with our four-month-old son. I put Robert in the arms of one of the Korean women and went to the refreshments area for sandwiches. The women exclaimed over Robert in Korean. There was a constant coming and going of women who were peeking into his face and touching his hair and back. He gazed around happily, his eyes going from the women to the furniture to the lights (he loved lights). Then I whispered to a food server to please go over and say something, pretty much anything, to Robert. She did. And when he heard her speak, he turned to her immediately and gave her a giant smile and started to babble. She spoke English, her native language, which is the language Robert heard at home.

To conclude that Robert could distinguish English from Korean might seem rash, given this one instance. But studies on children as young as Robert show that English-speaking children can pick out English from French and other languages, just as French-speaking children can pick out French from English and other languages. In these studies the children's recognition of English is indicated by increased eye activity and heartbeat, rather than the