

Child language acquisition - Kendall A. King

This chapter discussed what has come to be known as the ‘Wug Test.’ Created by Jean Berko Gleason in the 1950s, it was designed as a way to investigate English-speaking children’s acquisition of the plural and other morphemes. In the test, the child is presented with a novel, pretend creature, and told, “This is a wug.” Then the child is presented with another wug, and the researcher asks, “Now there are two of them. There are two...?”. Children who have successfully acquired the allomorph /z/ of the plural morpheme will respond: ‘wugs’ /wugz/. Other components of the Wug Test explore children’s understanding of verb conjugation and the possessive. This experiment provided the first clear evidence that young children can extract and apply generalizable rules from their language environment. Berko Gleason found that even very young children have already internalized systematic aspects of their linguistic system that enable them to produce Wug Test plurals, past tense, possessives, and other forms of words that they have never heard before. Description of the original Wug Test can be found in Jean Berko Gleason’s article “The Child’s Learning of English Morphology,” *Word* 14:150-77 (1958), downloadable at:

<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/topics/>

The notion of a “critical” or “sensitive” period is controversial within the field of language acquisition, and there are many studies which attempt to address this issue. Perhaps one of the most famous sources of data for this discussion comes from the tragic case of Genie, a girl who had extremely limited access human language until she was 13 years old. Although she made considerable progress for several years after being rescued from her abusive home, she never developed native-like proficiency in any language. Nativists often cite Genie as evidence in support of the critical period hypothesis; however, other researchers point out that Genie was also severely physically and emotionally abused, thus making it impossible to know which factors account for her lack of language proficiency. More information pertaining to this fascinating debate and the controversial research surrounding Genie can be found at the following website:

<http://www.feralchildren.com/en/pager.php?df=jones1995>

In recent years bilingual education has been debated intensely in the United States, and much of the research relating to language and education remains misunderstood. Although research clearly indicates that there are linguistic, cognitive, and academic advantages associated with using students’ first languages in the classroom, there is continued political debate concerning how to respond to demographic changes at both local and national levels; the appropriate roles of English, Spanish and other minority languages; and the responsibilities of parents, schools and communities in maintaining heritage languages. One of the key figures in these debates is Jim Crawford, a former journalist who is now the executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE). His extremely informative website can be accessed through the following link:

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/>

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The “cognitive revolution” in modern linguistics has meant a departure from the view of language as a behavior or habit learned through stimulus-response-reinforcement (as proposed by B. F. Skinner) towards a view of language as rule-governed and biologically based. Noam Chomsky sparked this movement in 1959 with his review of Skinner’s book *Verbal Behavior*, which featured three main arguments: (1) the role of reinforcement in language acquisition (2) linguistic creativity and (3) poverty of the stimulus. Chomsky’s scathing review of Skinner’s book can be found at:
<http://cogprints.org/1148/00/chomsky.htm>