1 Introduction

We use language every day to communicate with each other. Even young children use language. Children naturally acquire the language (or languages) spoken in the community around them: it could be English, Japanese, Russian, Tagalog, Zulu, or, in the case of the hearing impaired, American Sign Language (ASL), for example. While language consists of sounds (or signs as in ASL), words, and sentences, it is not simply a random sequence of sounds, words, or signs. For instance, a native speaker of English knows that a sequence of sounds like “abpmeshnsch” or the string of words “the walked yellow a yesterday pet three where quickly” do not represent utterances of English. Language is a more systematic, rule-governed mechanism. Sounds pattern in certain regular ways in forming words, and words combine to form sentences in a consistent manner as well.

The field of study where language is investigated in a systematic way is called linguistics. A primary goal of much linguistic research then is to discover the patterns that underlie languages. When linguists find such patterns in a particular language, they posit that there are rules or constraints in the language, which produce these patterns. Linguists hypothesize that when children acquire their native language during early childhood, they subconsciously learn the rules and constraints of their language that enable them to speak and understand the language in a fluent manner without hesitation. Thus, linguists are particularly interested in uncovering rules or constraints that speakers must subconsciously know when they speak a language – rules that speakers themselves are completely unaware of.

Some people have thought that children learn their first language by imitating what their parents say. That is, children were thought to learn their first language gradually, by listening to what their parents say to them and by imitating it. However, this assumption has been questioned for various reasons. For example, children have the ability to create sentences they have never heard before. If they
learned their first language simply by imitating their parents, it would be impossible for them to create sentences that are completely novel to them. The fact that children are capable of constantly creating new sentences immediately casts doubt on the assumption that children learn their first language by imitation.

Another piece of evidence in conflict with the assumption that children learn their first language by imitating their parents comes from the nature of the mistakes they make. In learning their native language, children make mistakes, but the mistakes often reflect their ability to make sophisticated generalizations concerning their first language on the basis of their observations. There are plenty of examples of this sort. One instance can be seen in English-speaking children’s mistakes in the irregular past tense verb forms. In English, regular past tense verbs are formed simply by adding -ed to the present tense verb. So, we get *laughed* from *laugh* and *smiled* from *smile*. English also has a large class of irregular verbs including *go–went*, *bring–brought*, and *break–broke*. For the irregular verbs, many children go through a stage where they use *goed* instead of *went* and *bringed* instead of *brought*. Adult speakers of English know irregular past tense verb forms, and they would not utter *goed*, *bringed*, and *breaked*; instead, they would say the correct forms, *went*, *brought*, and *broke*. If children learn their first language simply by imitating what their parents say, they should never produce incorrect past tense verb forms such as *goed*, *bringed*, and *breaked* because their parents do not say them. Rather than imitating their parents’ speech, children subconsciously make an observation concerning the formation of past tense verb forms on the basis of regular forms such as *laughed* and *smiled*, and then make a generalization that past tense verbs are formed by adding -ed to present tense verbs. The incorrect outputs like *goed*, *bringed*, and *breaked* result from an overgeneralization of such a “rule” to irregular verbs. This suggests that children do have the ability to generalize on the basis of their observations.

Children also make mistakes in their use of verbs. Some English verbs have causative counterparts. Consider the pairs in (1)–(2), which are taken from Pinker (1989).

(1) a. The horse walked/galloped/trotted/raced/ran/jumped past the barn.
   b. I walked/galloped/trotted/raced/ran/jumped the horse past the barn.

(Pinker 1989: 131)

(2) a. The log slid/skidded/floated/rolled/bounced.
   b. Brian slid/skidded/floated/rolled/bounced the log.

(Pinker 1989: 130)

The verbs of the (b) sentences in (1)–(2) display causative use. For example, in (1a) the horse voluntarily performed the action of walking, galloping, trotting, etc. In (1b), on the other hand, I instigated some action that led to the horse’s walking, galloping, trotting, etc. That is, I caused the horse to walk, gallop, trot,
etc. Similarly, in (2b), Brian caused the log to slide, skid, float, etc., while such a causative interpretation is not available in the (a) sentence. So, the same verb can be used to induce the causative interpretation. Children observe this phenomenon, but their output is not necessarily grammatical; (3)–(6), taken from Pinker (1989: 305–306), are actual utterances by children (cf. Bowerman 1982; Pinker 1989).

(3) You can drink me the milk.
(4) Will you have me a lesson? [Request to adult friend in swimming pool]
(5) Andrea, I want to watch you this book.
(6) Remember me what I came in for.

The verb drink in (3) is used with a causative interpretation, although such a reading is not allowed with this verb in adult English. So, the child used the verb to mean “to feed” or “to help to drink”. Similarly, have in (4) is used as “give”, the causative counterpart of have (“let me have”); in (5) watch you is used to mean “have you watch”; and in (6) remember is meant to be “remind” (“let me remember”). Another example that is often observed in children’s speech is a sentence like “He learned me real good”, in which learn is intended to be “make me learn”. In these errors which actually occur in children’s speech, we can see that they are analyzing drink/have/watch/remember/learn as causative verbs just like walk, run, and roll in (1)–(2), for instance. Notice that children would not make these sorts of mistakes if they spoke the language just by imitating their parents, because adult speakers would not make such mistakes. Instead, children are making a generalization and applying it to new words and sentences based on what they hear. What is important here is that children are actively making generalizations, trying to figure out the language, although this task is largely subconscious.

Noam Chomsky, the most influential American linguist in the second half of the twentieth century, is a strong proponent of the hypothesis that there must be something innate in the human cognitive system which enables children to create sentences they have never heard before, and enables them to figure out and learn their language. Under this view, one of the main tasks of a linguist is to figure out the exact nature of the innateness. In undertaking this sort of task, linguists first observe some language-related phenomenon and describe it. Second, they try to figure out whether the phenomenon is of an arbitrary nature, or whether there is some systematic pattern associated with it. When the latter is found to be the case, they formulate a hypothesis on the basis of this pattern. Often the hypothesis makes further predictions about patterns in the language. Third, the hypothesis is tested against a new set of data. If the new data are inconsistent with the predictions, the hypothesis is falsified, and hence needs to be discarded or modified in order to account for the patterns found in the language.
We shall see that this notion and strategy of hypothesis testing will play an important role in the presentation of the language data in many of the chapters in this book. To this end, we will primarily examine the Japanese language, but on occasion we will also compare Japanese with English as well as other languages of the world.

**Suggested Readings**

A general introduction to the field of linguistics can be found in Akmajian et al. (2010), Fromkin et al. (2011), Finegan (2012), Parker and Riley (2010), Napoli (1996, 2003), Pinker (1999), and Jackendoff (2002), among many other textbooks and introductory books. Parker and Riley (2010) is particularly accessible to those who have no prior knowledge of linguistics. Chomsky’s program of linguistic research can be found in Chomsky (1986), Cook and Newson (2007), and Pinker (1994).