

ASSIGNMENT 6: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Do language learners rely on general-purpose strategies, or are important aspects of human language innately specified? The reading for this assignment argues for the second possibility:

- Gleitman and Newport (1995). The invention of language by children: environmental and biological influences on the acquisition of language.

You should also look at pp 343–357 of the textbook.

Each question will be graded by a different person. Please take this into account and make sure that your answers to each question stand alone.

You may discuss the assigned materials with other students, but should provide your own answers to each question. More precisely, your answers should represent your own ideas, and your own way of organizing and explaining these ideas. Please put your ideas in your own words— you may quote key phrases from the article if you like, but as a rule of thumb any direct quote should be at most a few words long.

A FAQ for this assignment will be maintained on Blackboard. Please check the FAQ before contacting us with questions.

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Please remember the following things:

1. **Don't change the page structure of the original assignment** (e.g. make sure that you don't use two sides for a question that was originally restricted to one side, and make sure that you don't submit a single page that includes responses to two different questions). If you're using a program other than Microsoft Word, you'll need to be especially careful about preserving the page structure – please make sure that your submission is consistent with the structure of the online pdf version of this document.
2. Print out a copy of your answers and turn it in before the end of class on the due date. Make sure that you fill in and include the cover sheet that appears on the next page. If you decide not to answer one or two questions, submit the blank pages (with empty boxes) for these questions. **Please put your name on top of each page and print out your answers single-sided.** We will separate your packet and distribute different pages to individual graders.
3. Upload the file to the course website on Blackboard. The file should be uploaded via the Assignments page. The uploaded file will give us a permanent copy of your assignment (in case of query or loss of the paper copy). If you're having trouble submitting your file, try using a different browser before contacting us. Note that submitting an electronic copy alone is not sufficient – **if you do not submit a hard copy, then you will not receive any credit for this assignment.**
4. Some questions may ask you to sketch graphs or draw diagrams. If you choose to submit hand-drawn diagrams for these questions, it's fine to leave the corresponding boxes on the electronic copy blank.

PLEASE FOLLOW THE ABOVE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY. To encourage you to do so, 10 % of your assignment grade will depend on following the instructions correctly.

- If you do not print out your answers single-sided and write your name on each page, you will lose 5% of your grade.
- If you do not upload an electronic copy of your assignment to the Assignments page on Blackboard, you will lose 5% of your grade.
- If your hard copy does not preserve the page structure of HW6.pdf (see Blackboard), you will lose 5% of your grade.

Turn in this homework in class on **Thurs Nov 21** or earlier to Rony's mailbox (BH 336D).

COVER SHEET

Honor code:

“My responses to these questions represent my own ideas and I have not received undue assistance from any source”

Your signature: _____

Please choose one of the following options:

☐: I would like to pick up my graded assignment at the end of class. The final grade will be written on the underside of the first page, but I understand that others may see my graded work.

☐: I prefer that my graded assignment not be distributed at the end of class, and understand that I will need to collect it during Rony's office hour .

Your signature: _____

1) (a) Goldin-Meadow and colleagues have studied deaf children who are not taught a sign language. Both these children and their parents, however, still use gestures to communicate. Describe two ways in which the gestures of the children differ from the gestures of their parents.

Difference 1:

Difference 2:

(b) How do the findings you mentioned in (a) relate to the claim that language acquisition is “heavily constrained” by our biology (p 2)?.

2) (a) Explain the concept of a “critical” or “sensitive” period in language learning. p 14 of the reading and p 350 of the textbook might be helpful, but please put your answer in your own words.

(b) Describe the Newport (1990) study (p 14) and explain why it supports the idea of a critical period.

3) (a) Explain the difference between a pidgin and a creole in your own words.

(b) Given a pidgin and a creole, which of the two is likely to be more complicated? (circle one)

Pidgin

Creole

Give one plausible reason for this difference in complexity

4) Consider sentence S: “The essay which is on the table is incomplete.” Consider two possible rules for turning the sentence into a question:

- serial-order rule: move the first ‘is’ to the front
- structure-dependent rule: move the ‘is’ in the main clause to the front

(a) List the question formed when the serial order rule is applied to sentence S:

(b) List the question formed when the structure-dependent rule is applied to sentence S:

(c) Language learners never make errors similar to your response in part (a). How do Gleitman and Newport explain this finding?

5) Gleitman and Newport focus on spoken language rather than writing and reading.

(a) Identify one of their key claims about language that is definitely false for the case of written language.

(b) Give one reason why it makes sense for Gleitman and Newport to focus on spoken rather than written language.