



Discussion Sections AA & AF, 1st Session: Intro and A Uniquely Human Instinct

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September 12, 2025

Welcome!

The plan for today:

A brief Introduction

Organizational bits

Review of Language as an Instinct



Hi, How Are You?

My name is:

(Optional) My pronouns are:

I study:

I'm a native speaker of:

What? Where? When? How?

– Here, we will:

- Review lectures and assignments
- Ask questions and provide answers
- Practice



(<https://segal-nir.github.io/201>)

- Come to the office hours! (of whichever TA)
- I won't check attendance (but being here is key)
- Consider signing up for your section's [contact list](#)

What? Where? When? How?



- Homework is
 - Out every Monday (1st one on the upcoming Monday, 9/15)
 - Due the Monday after (so for the 1st, it will be 9/22)
- Submit a **PDF** file!
- 50% for (a proper) submission + 50% for the content of your answer
- Get to the point; often, all you'll need is a sentence or two
- You are allowed (and encouraged) to collaborate, but be sure to name the people you worked with

What? Where? When? How?

- For any issue with submissions, **Email** me by 13:25 on Monday when its due
- You got an extension? It's by the start of the Wednesday lecture (\approx two days after the original deadline)
- You only get three chances for late submissions!*
- Graded assignments will be returned by the Friday of the same week
- For any grading issue, let me know by the following Friday



Questions?

Language: A Uniquely Human Instinct¹

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1 On General and Species-Specific Instincts

Linguistics' goal: Understanding the system of rules and mental representations underlying our *ability* to produce and understand language.

Our unique ability

Acquiring and using this system is argued to be a uniquely human instinct.

The hypothesis: Although humans are not born with the ability to produce language immediately, we are born with a *species-specific* ability and a drive to acquire language.

As such, our linguistic abilities should (and indeed do) exhibit many of *the characteristics of instinctive behaviors*.

Intuitively, the acquisition process cannot consist solely of memorizing utterances; it requires internalizing the rules that assemble linguistic building blocks. Which is why we call it 'acquisition' rather than 'learning', since it is not an intentional, explicit teaching-learning process but instead resembles instinctive behavior. More precisely, we should consider the following:

Lenneberg's characteristics of biologically controlled behaviors

- (1) The behavior emerges before it is necessary;
- (2) Its appearance is not the result of a conscious decision; its emergence is not triggered by external events (though the surrounding environment must be sufficiently "rich" for it to develop adequately);
- (3) Direct teaching and intensive practice have relatively little effect;

- (4) There is a regular sequence of "milestones" as the behavior develops, and these can usually be correlated with age and other aspects of development;
- (5) There is likely to be a "critical period" for the acquisition of the behavior.

Sounds familiar?

Can you recall how these features apply to some instinctive behavior (bird songs or body care) and then to language? Can you make examples of why they are different from *learned* abilities?

On top of those we mentioned evidence that suggests that there is an innate component to language acquisition:

- (6) Language is a behavior that is uniform across all human cultures.

2 Universality and independence from general intelligence

As many linguists did, the observation in (6) can lead one to hypothesize the existence of universals in language. There are certain features that are very common across languages, even if they are geographically distant and historically unrelated: *all have nouns and verbs, all have negation*, etc.

One step further

Some* linguists went on to hypothesize the existence of a *universal grammar*, an inborn set of structural characteristics shared by all languages.

¹I'd like to thank Andrea Matticchio and Shaunak Phadnis, since this handout builds on their course materials.

However, this inborn ability doesn't stem from general intelligence:

- Language is not specific to human beings only because of their type of intelligence;
- Acquisition does not happen differently between human beings according to their general intelligence.
- How do we know it?
 - Language acquisition is performed optimally by children, whose intelligence has not yet reached full maturity;
 - There are specific conditions of language impairment that only affect language competence, without affecting other cognitive abilities.