Madeline Meyers (AB ’19, Psychology & Comparative Human Development)

“Caregiver reconstruction of children’s errors: the preservation of complexity in language”

Why do languages change? One possibility is they evolve due to two competing pressures: one, for the language to be easily transmitted to new generations—and hence simple—and another, for the language to be a useful, descriptive form of communication—and hence more complex. However, few studies have explored these pressures in the most skilled language learners: children. Conventional iterated learning studies focus on the transmission of a novel language from one adult to the next. However, this ignores one of the important features of language learning, namely, receiving feedback. This study compares adult performance on a conventional iterated learning task with their performance on a task which allows for error correction by a secondary participant. Results show that adding this secondary “fixing” participant allows a greater level of complexity to be retained in the language compared with the baseline task. Data collection is ongoing with children, but the current results suggest that editors (e.g. parents) may be playing a dual role in both child language acquisition and language evolution by re-introducing complexity into a given language.