erties all languages have in common, and whether those properties are somehow hard-wired into the human brain. If it's true that babies are born with a lot of language knowledge built in, that will help to explain how it's possible for a very small child — with no teaching, and regardless of intelligence level — to quickly and easily acquire a system of language so complex that no other animal or machine has ever mastered it.

For further information

Pecchi, Jean Stillwell. 1994. **Child Language.** London: Routledge.

Pinker, Steven. 1994. **The Language Instinct.** New York: W.W.Morrow.

"Playing the Language Game." Program Two: **Acquiring the Human Language.** The Human Language Series. Video cassette. New York: Equinox Films, 1995.

Smith, Neil. 1989. **The Twitter Machine: Reflections on Language.** Oxford: Blackwell.

The Linguistic Society of America was founded in 1924 for the advancement of the scientific study of language. The Society serves its nearly 7,000 personal and institutional members through scholarly meetings, publications, and special activities designed to advance the discipline.

The Society holds its Annual Meeting in early January each year and publishes a quarterly journal, LANGUAGE and the LSA Bulletin. Among its special education activities are the Linguistic Institutes held every other summer in odd-numbered years and co-sponsored by a host university.

The web site for the Society (http://www.lsadc.org) includes a Directory of Programs in Linguistics in the United States and Canada, The Field of Linguistics (brief, nontechnical essays describing the discipline and its subfields), and statements and resolutions issued by the Society on matters such as language rights, the English-only/English-plus debate, bilingual education, and ebonics.

Language Acquisition

Written and edited by Betty Birner

Linguistic Society of America

1325 18th St, NW, Suite 211
Washington, DC 20036-6501
(202) 835-1714
lsa@lsadc.org
http://www.lsadc.org

How do children acquire language? Do parents teach their children to talk?

No. Children acquire language quickly, easily, and without effort or formal teaching. It happens automatically, whether their parents try to teach them or not.

Although parents or other caretakers don't teach their children to speak, they do perform an important role by talking to their children. Children who are never spoken to will not acquire language. And the language must be used for interaction with the child; for example, a child who regularly hears language on the TV or radio but nowhere else will not learn to talk.

Children acquire language through interaction — not only with their parents and other adults, but also with other children. All normal children who grow up in normal households, surrounded by conversation, will acquire the language that is being used around them. And it is just as easy for a child to acquire two or more languages at the same time, as long as they are regularly interacting with speakers of those languages.

The special way in which many adults speak to small children also helps them to acquire language. Studies show that the 'baby talk' that adults naturally use with infants and toddlers tends to always be just a bit ahead of the level of the child's own language development, as though pulling the child along. This 'baby talk' has simpler vocabulary and sentence structure than adult language, exaggerated intonation and sounds, and lots of repetition and questions. All of these features help the child to sort out the meanings, sounds, and sentence patterns of his or her language.

When do children learn to talk?

There is no one point at which a child learns to talk. By the time the child first utters a single meaningful word, he or she has already spent many months playing around with the sounds and intonations of language and connecting words with meanings. Children acquire language in stages, and different children reach the various stages at different times. The order in which these stages are reached, however, is virtually always the same.

The first sounds a baby makes are the sounds of crying. Then, around six weeks of age, the baby will begin making vowel sounds, starting with *aah, ee*, and *ooh*. At about six months, the baby starts to produce strings of consonant-vowel pairs like *boo* and *da*. In this stage, the child is playing around with the sounds of speech and sorting out the sounds that are important for making words in his or her language from the sounds that aren't. Many parents hear a child in this stage produce a combination like "*mama*" or "*dada*" and excitedly declare that the child has uttered his or her first word, even though the child probably didn't attach any meaning to the 'word'.

Somewhere around age one or one and a half, the child will actually begin to utter single words with meaning. These are always 'content' words like *cookie, doggie, run,* and *see* — never 'function' words like *and, the,* and *of*. Around the age of two, the child will begin putting two words together to make 'sentences' like *doggie run*. A little later on, the child may produce longer sentences that lack function words, such as *big doggie run fast*. At this point all that's left to add are the function words, some different sentence forms (like the passive), and the more complex sound combinations (like *str*). By the time the child enters kindergarten, he or she will have acquired the vast majority of the rules and sounds of the language. After this, it's just a matter of combining the different sentence types in new ways and adding new words to his or her vocabulary.

Why did my daughter say *feet* correctly for a while, and then go back to calling them *foots*?

Actually, she hasn't 'gone back' at all; she's gone forward. When she used the word *feet* as a toddler, she was just imitating what she had heard. But now she has learned a rule for making plurals, which is that you add the s sound to the end of the word. So she's just applying her new rule to all nouns — even the exceptions to the rule, like *foot/feet*. She'll probably do the same thing when she learns to add *-ed* to verbs to make the past tense, saying things like *he standed up* until she learns that *stand/stood* is an exception to the rule. She'll sort it all out eventually, but for now, rest assured that this is progress; it's evidence that she's going beyond imitation and actually learning the rules of the English language.

How can a child who can't even tie her own shoes master a system as complex as the English language?

Although the 'baby talk' that parents use with small children may help them to acquire language, many linguists believe that this still cannot explain how infants and toddlers can acquire such a complicated system so easily.

It's far easier for a child to acquire language as an infant and toddler than it will be for the same child to learn, say, French in a college classroom 18 years later. Many linguists now say that a newborn's brain is already programmed to learn language, and in fact that when a baby is born he or she already instinctively knows a lot about language. This means that it's as natural for a human being to talk as it is for a bird to sing or for a spider to spin a web. In this sense, language may be like walking: The ability to walk is genetic, and children develop the ability to walk whether or not anybody tries to teach them to do so. In the same way, children develop the ability to talk whether or not anybody tries to teach them. For this reason, many linguists believe that language ability is genetic. Researchers believe there may be a 'critical period' (lasting roughly from infancy until puberty) during which language acquisition is effortless. According to these researchers, changes occur in the structure of the brain during puberty, and after that it is much harder to learn a new language.

Linguists have become deeply interested in finding out what all 5,000 or so of the world's languages have in common, because this may tell us what kinds of knowledge about language are actually innate. For example, it appears that all languages use the vowel sounds *aah, ee,* and *ooh* — the same vowel sounds a baby produces first. By studying languages from all over the world, linguists hope to find out what prop-