

# Explaining Individual Differences in Language Acquisition

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## Abstract

Language is an extremely tenacious skill. It does not need careful tending or special treatment but develops without much effort on the part of either the parent or the child. However, that is not the same as claiming that everyone learns language in exactly the same way; there is substantial individual variation. Some children learn language extremely fast, producing their first words before one year of age. In fact, some children speak before they can crawl. Others are much slower to develop: for these, walking comes first. Some children are adventurous at combining words, producing strings peppered with grammatical errors. Others seem more cautious, only combining words when they are absolutely sure they have the grammar right. In this lecture, we illustrate how the study of individual differences provides crucial insights into the language acquisition process; the role of genetics, the child's environment and the role of the child's own developing cognitive system.

### Core readings

Chapter 8. Explaining individual variation. In Rowland, C. F. (2013). *Understanding Child Language Acquisition*. Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group. A summary of the topics covered in this lecture. Note that this lecture will focus, and expand on, the material covered in sections 8.1. and 8.2. However, the others two sections – on acquisition in extraordinary circumstances, and the relationship between language and cognitive impairment are also relevant to the study of variation in language acquisition

Bates, E., Dale, P. S. and Thal, D. (1995). Individual differences and their implications for theories of language development. In P. Fletcher and B. MacWhinney (Eds), *The handbook of child language* (pp. 96–151). Blackwell, Oxford. A thorough investigation of individual differences in typically developing children.

Peter, M., Durrant, S., Jessop, A., Bidgood, A., Pine, J.M. & Rowland, C. F. (under review). *Does speed of processing or vocabulary size predict later language growth in toddlers?* The original article that describes the research covered in part 3 of the lecture.

### Additional reading, for a more in-depth view of variation in language acquisition:

Bates, E., Bretherton, I. & Snyder, L. (1988). *From first words to grammar: Individual differences and dissociable mechanisms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An in-depth look at individual differences within typically developing populations.

Bishop, D. & Leonard, L. (Eds) (2000). *Speech and language impairments in children: Causes, characteristics, intervention, and outcome*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press. A comprehensive coverage of research into impairments.

Lieven, E. (1994). Crosslinguistic and crosscultural aspects of language addressed to children. In C. Gallaway & B. J. Richards (Eds), *Input and interaction in language acquisition* (pp. 57–73). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A readable discussion of language development across different cultures.

Mayberry, R. I. & Squires, B. (2006). Sign language acquisition. In Brown, K. (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of language and linguistics* (2nd ed.) (Vol. 11, pp. 291–296). Oxford: Elsevier. A good summary of recent research.

Stromswold, K. (2001). The heritability of language: A review and metaanalysis of twin, adoption and linkage studies. *Language*, 77(4), 647–723. Stromswold's classic meta-analysis on the evidence for the role of genetics from behavioural genetics.