

Ling 51/Psych 56L:  
Acquisition of Language

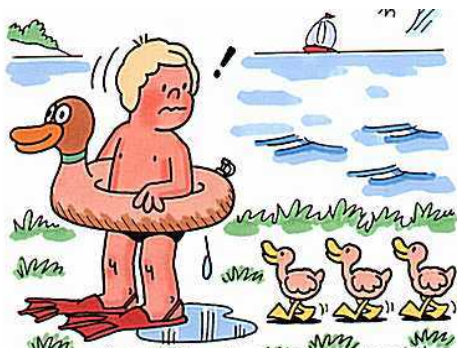
Lecture 4  
Biological bases of language acquisition II

Announcements

Review questions for biological bases of language acquisition available

Be working on HW2 (due 10/13/16) – remember that collaboration is highly encouraged

The critical period hypothesis



Critical & sensitive periods

“critical period for language” = biologically determined period during which language acquisition **must** occur in order for language to be learned fully and correctly

Other biologically determined deadlines:

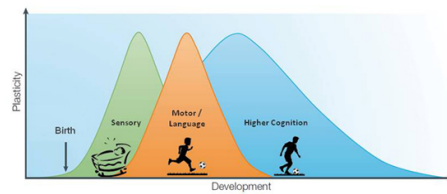
- **imprinting**: chicks & ducklings follow first thing they see forever (it’s likely their mommy)
- **visual cells in humans**: if cells for both eyes don’t receive visual input during the first year or so of life, they lose the ability to respond to visual input



## Critical & sensitive periods

“sensitive period”: biologically determined period during which learning must occur for development to happen correctly, but development can still occur partially after this period

Fig 1: Windows of plasticity in brain development



Adapted from Mensch, T.K. (2015). Critical period plasticity in local cortical circuits. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 18(11), 877–888.

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

(1) **Ideal experiment:** deprive children of all linguistic input during the purported critical/sensitive period and see how language development occurs.



Problem: ideal experiment isn't so ideal ethically or logistically



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Some historical and modern cases that have unintentionally provided lack of linguistic input to children:

“wild children”: like Victor of Aveyron, Oxana Malaya of the Ukraine

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/293679-forbidden-experiment/>



Problem: unclear lack of language is solely due to lack of linguistic input (may be other factors)



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

One success story for lack of linguistic input with a young child: [Isabelle](#)

1930s: 6-year-old Isabelle discovered hidden away in a dark room with a deaf-mute mother as her only contact.

She was taught to speak and by age 8, appeared to be normal.

Potential implication: [Isabelle discovered before critical/sensitive period was over.](#)

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

A more thorough study: [Genie](#)



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

A more thorough study: [Genie](#)

1970s: 13-year-old Genie brought by her mother to social services after escaping mentally ill father; until mother's escape, had no language input (and very horrific living conditions)

By age 17, she had a five-year-old's vocabulary, and could express meanings by combining words together.

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

A more thorough study: [Genie](#)

However...syntactic skills lagged far behind - deficient in both production and comprehension.

"Mama wash hair in sink."

"Like go ride yellow school bus."

"At school scratch face."

"Father take piece wood. Hit. Cry."

"I want Curtiss play piano."

"Applesauce buy store"

"Man motorcycle have."

"Father hit Genie cry long time ago."

Dichotic listening tasks showed language was a [right-hemisphere activity](#) for her (while it's a left-hemisphere activity for most adults).

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

A more thorough study: [Genie](#)

Potential Implication: Genie discovered after critical period was over.

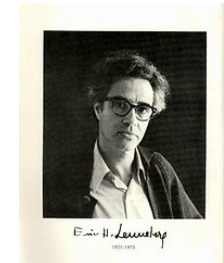
However, Genie may have had other cognitive disabilities...

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Lenneberg (1967):

“the only safe conclusions to be drawn from the multitude of reports is life in dark closets, wolves’ dens, forests, or sadistic parents’ backyards is not conducive to good health or normal development”



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Another study: [Chelsea](#) (Curtiss 1988)

Family background: A partially deaf woman incorrectly diagnosed as “retarded”. From a loving home.

Discovered at age 31, and fitted with hearing aids

Outcome: Learned a large vocabulary, but syntax and morphology worse than Genie.

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Another study: [Chelsea](#) (Curtiss 1988)

Sample speech from Chelsea:

- (1) The small a the hat
- (2) Orange Tim car in
- (3) I Wanda be drive come
- (4) Breakfast eating girl
- (5) They are is car in the Tim

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

(2) Late acquisition of sign language (ASL): deaf-of-hearing children whose parents don't know sign language. Children are eventually exposed to sign language when they encounter other deaf children.

Good: individuals have normal early childhood experience, except for lack of language input

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

If a critical or sensitive period is true, children who learn earlier should be better than children who learned later...

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

If a critical or sensitive period is true, children who learn earlier should be better than children who learned later - this is what Newport (1990) found. Children who were 4 to 6 years old when first exposed to ASL were far superior in their sign language ability when compared to children who were exposed after age 12.



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Also important: not just about how long sign language speakers had known the language. Speakers who had been signing for more than 30 years showed this same difference: those exposed younger were far superior in their language skills to those exposed when they were older.



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

(3) Look at second language learning.

Why? Children who learn a second language when they are young often become indistinguishable from their native-born peers. In contrast, people who are older have very different outcomes.



## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Testing age differences in second language acquisition:

- Oyama (1976): testing Italian immigrants learning English  
**Age of arrival** was better predictor of **accent** than how many years the immigrant had been speaking English

- Oyama (1978): **Age of arrival** was better predictor of **comprehension** than number of years speaking the language (not just about motor skill learning ability)

## Critical & sensitive periods

How do we test for a critical/sensitive period for language acquisition?

Testing age differences in second language acquisition:

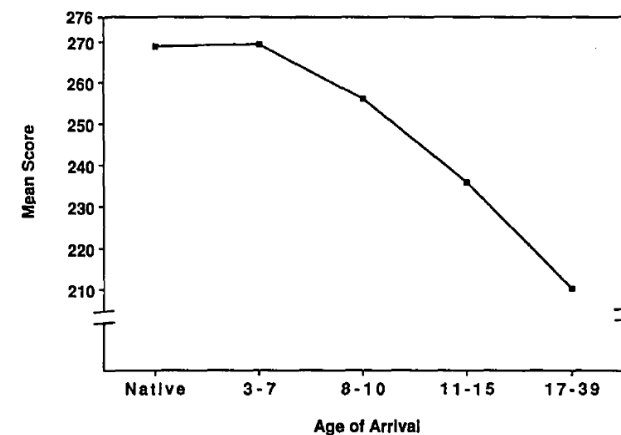
Johnson & Newport (1989): testing grammatical competency of Chinese & Korean natives living in the US

Heard recorded voices speaking sentences, and had to judge whether they were correct or not.

“The farmer bought two pig at the market.”

“Tom is reading book in bathtub.”

Second-language proficiency dependent on age of initial language exposure (even with same number of years of exposure total)

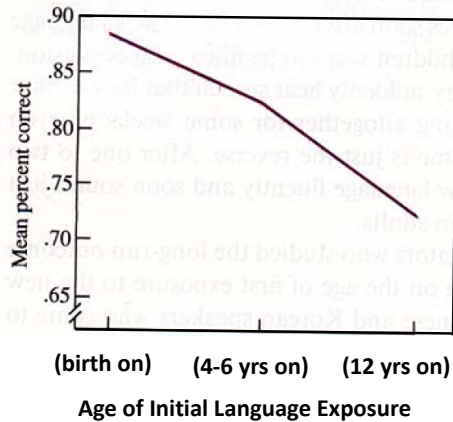


Second-language proficiency dependent on age of initial language exposure (even with same number of years of exposure total)

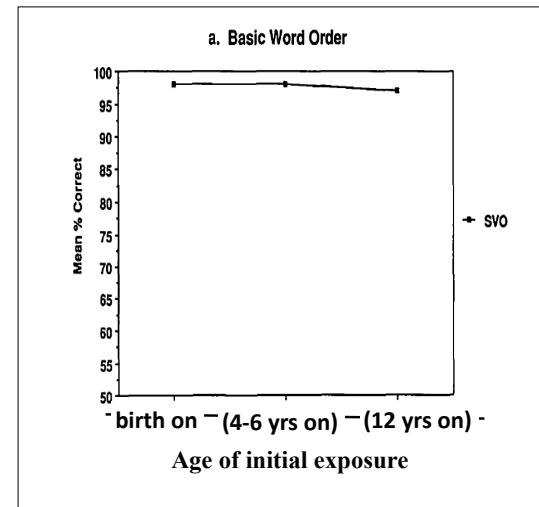
Morphology:

e.g. verb agreement in production

Tom *is*/\**are* reading book in bathtub



Second-language proficiency dependent on age of initial language exposure – but not all aspects are dependent



Basic word order: SVO

Subject Verb Object

Ex: "Penguins like fish."

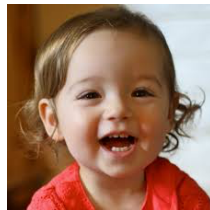
As opposed to

"Fish penguins like"  
(Object Subject Verb)

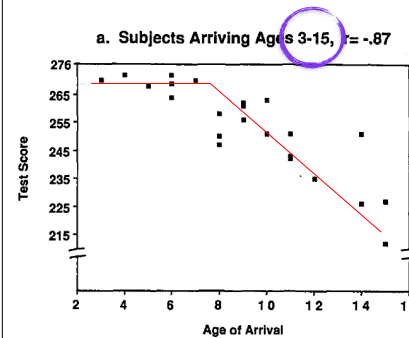
Second-language proficiency dependent on age of initial language exposure – but not all aspects are dependent

Balari & Lorenzo 2015:

Phonology and certain aspects of morphosyntax (how words and word pieces combine together to form phrases) seem to be set earlier while lexical knowledge seems to remain attainable for quite some time.

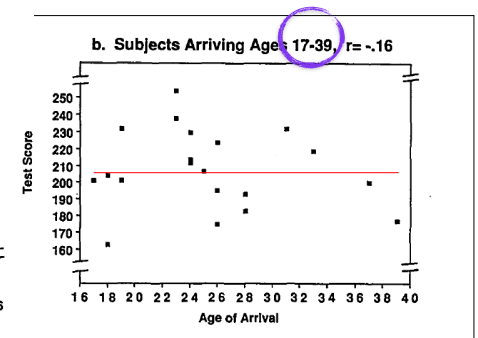


Before and after the critical/sensitive period (sometimes called "maturation")



During Maturation

Decline in ability with maturation.



After Maturation

No relationship between Age of Arrival and Test Score

## Some evidence for critical/sensitive period

Johnson & Newport (1989) also found that performance was not correlated with:

- Formal instruction in English
- Amount of initial exposure to English
- Reported motivation to learn English
- Self-consciousness in English
- Identification with American culture

## Some evidence for critical/sensitive period

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies confirm **different neural processing for language** in individuals who learned before age 7 to 8 vs. individuals who learned after this age (Kim et al. 1997, Dehaene et al. 1997, Wartenburger et al. 2003, Saur et al. 2009)



## Some evidence for critical/sensitive period

Event-related potential (ERP) studies confirm differing **left-hemisphere specialization for language** in individuals who learned before age 4 vs. individuals who learned between 4 and 7 vs. individuals who learned after 7 (Weber-Fox & Neville 1996, 1999, Isel 2005)

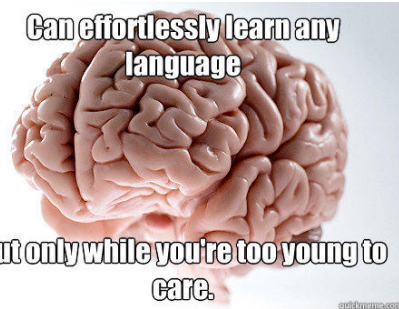


## Sum up: Critical/sensitive period

- Language learning is comparatively *effortless* before age 8 or so, extremely effortful after
- Applies to both first and second language learning
- Applies to spoken and signed languages
- Critical/sensitive periods similar to other biologically-programmed abilities in humans and other species



## Sum up: Critical/sensitive period

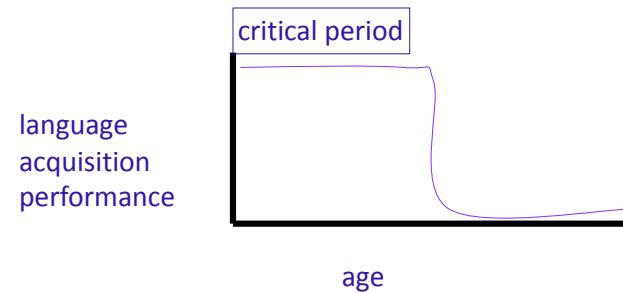


<http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/36f39x/>

## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

If there is truly a critical period of language acquisition, people learning language after this period should not succeed very well at all (they should be equally bad). In contrast, people within the critical period should do very well (they should be equally native-like).

Expectation: discontinuous function of performance



## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

However, most of the evidence we've seen (including the one below) suggests that there is a **smoother drop-off**. (support for **sensitive period**)

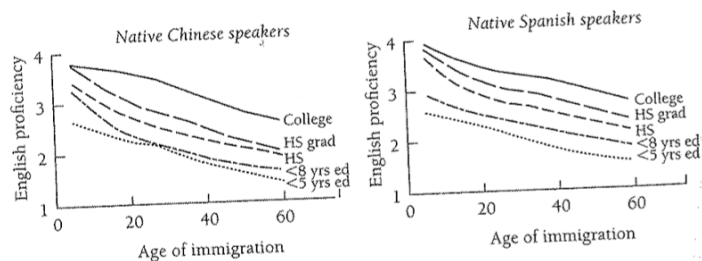


FIGURE 2.6 THE RELATION BETWEEN AGE OF IMMIGRATION AND ENGLISH PROFICIENCY FOR NATIVE CHINESE AND SPANISH SPEAKERS WHO IMMIGRATED TO THE UNITED STATES

Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley 2003

## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

See Thiessen, Girard, & Erickson 2016 for a summary of studies supporting a **sensitive** instead of a critical period.

The potential relationship to **domain-general statistical learning processes**:

“From this perspective, developmental change arises, not from a switch from one set of processes to another, but due to **changes in the effectiveness** of a continuously present set of learning processes... while the [statistical learning] processes of extraction and integration are active across the lifespan, their **outcome will differ as a function of the learner's prior experience and maturational state.**”

## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

See Thiessen, Girard, & Erickson 2016 for a summary of studies supporting a **sensitive** instead of a critical period.

The potential relationship to **domain-general statistical learning processes**:

“...there are two major factors that may plausibly be linked to changes in language learning outcomes associated with increasing age. The first is **increasing familiarity of language**, which makes a learner better adapted to the languages with which they are familiar, but less able to adapt to novel languages. The second factor is maturational changes, which **alter** both the cognitive architecture supporting statistical learning, and the **degree of plasticity with which the learner’s neurobiological organization can adapt to novel input.**”

## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

See Thiessen, Girard, & Erickson 2016 for a summary of studies supporting a **sensitive** instead of a critical period.

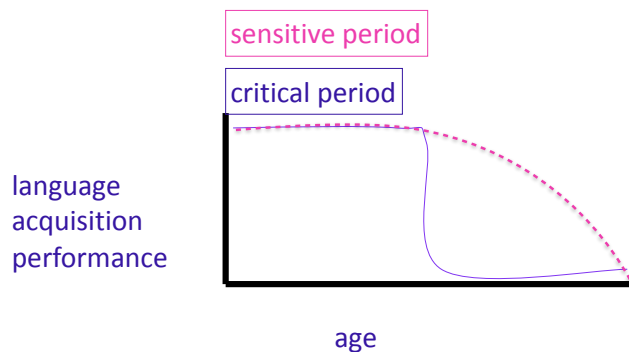
Why there’s an age effect:

“...the advantage of younger language learners relates, in part, to the fact that infants and young children are **highly adaptable learners**, but **not yet strongly adapted to their particular linguistic environment.**”



## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

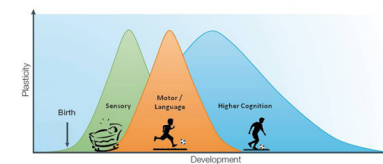
Since we don’t often see this sharp drop-off in performance, it’s more likely there is a **sensitive period** for learning aspects of language, rather than a critical period.



## Critical vs. sensitive, revisited

“...rather than postulating one critical period for language acquisition, a more plausible hypothesis is that grammatical development is characterized by several **sensitive phases**...a phase can be characterized by an optimal period for the acquisition of the phenomenon in question...characterized by a relatively **short onset**, followed by an extended **optimal period** and a **gradual offset**...”  
– Meisel, 2013

Fig 1: Windows of plasticity in brain development



## So why are younger children better?

“Less is more” hypothesis: Newport 1991

Children can remember less than adults (and have other cognitive limitations, like less attention). **Perhaps language is actually easier to figure out if the input is limited to smaller chunks.** Adults remember more and can store longer chunks, which makes their analytical task harder.

Studies supporting the idea that a **limitation on the way children process input leads to better learning performance**: Phillips & Pearl 2012, Phillips & Pearl in press, Pearl, Goldwater, & Steyvers 2011, Pearl, Goldwater, & Steyvers 2010, Pearl 2009, Pearl & Lidz 2009, Pearl 2008, Pearl & Weinberg 2007, Dresher 1999, Lightfoot 1999, Lightfoot 1991

## So why are younger children better?

Some experimental support for the utility of “Less is more” when learning a foreign language as an adult: Chin & Kersten 2010

Adults learning French over two one-hour sessions  
- full sentences vs. small phrases that incrementally increased length to full sentences (to simulate children’s steadily expanding processing abilities)

**Adults learning incrementally outperformed adults learning from full sentences on language proficiency tests of vocabulary and grammar.**

## So why are younger children better?

Some experimental support for the utility of “Less is more” when learning a language as an adult: Finn et al. 2014

Adult subjects listened to an artificial language they were meant to learn. One group was told to pay close attention (active listeners) while the other group listened more passively — they were distracted by doing a puzzle or coloring while they listened.

**Active listeners: More cognitive resources** focused on task.  
**Passive listeners: Fewer cognitive resources** focused on task.

**The passive listeners outdid the active listeners** when it came to learning morphology (how words combine together)!

## So why are younger children better?

Some experimental support for the utility of “Less is more” when learning a language as an adult: Finn et al. 2014

"We found that effort helps you in most situations, for things like figuring out what the units of language that you need to know are, and basic ordering of elements. **But when trying to learn morphology, at least in this artificial language we created, it's actually worse when you try.**" — Amy Finn



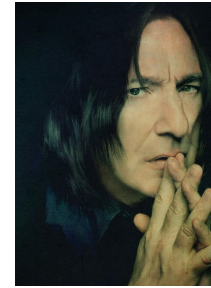
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/07/140721142211.htm>

## Recap

There appears to be a period during which language is acquired most easily - whether this is a critical period or sensitive period may vary depending on what specific linguistic knowledge we look at.

The “less is more” hypothesis is one idea for why children’s minds might be more suited to language learning than adults’ minds.

## Questions?



You should be able to answer up through question 19 of the bio bases review sheet, and up through question 19 on HW2.