

Psych56L/ Ling51

Fall 2008

Homework 1: Introduction & Biological Bases of Language Acquisition

Or “The Language Adventures of Sigmund von Hacklestein, part 1”

Remember to write your full name and University ID number on your assignment. If you collaborate with other students in the class, please make sure to indicate who you worked with.

(41 points total)

(1) Sigmund von Hacklestein hasn't been as good about attending class as you have, and he doesn't remember the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. All he remembers about grammar is that his English teachers have chastised him for starting statements with “but”, even though he does this in normal conversation all the time. Consider the interaction below:

Sigmund: “Why can't I write ‘*But the girl would eventually solve the Labyrinth.*’ in my essay?”

Sigmund's Teacher: “Never begin sentences with conjunctions like ‘*but*’ or ‘*and*’.”

Sigmund: “But I do it all the time when I speak!”

Sigmund's Teacher: “I care about how you write, not how you speak.”

(a) Briefly define prescriptive grammar. [2 pts]

(b) Briefly define descriptive grammar. [2 pts]

(c) Is the rule that Sigmund and his teacher are discussing a prescriptive or descriptive grammar rule? [2 pts]

(2) Sigmund is quite fascinated by how deaf children learn language, particularly when their parents are not deaf. Sigmund is not alone – many language researchers share his interest in that learning situation. Why are researchers interested in studying the communication systems of deaf children who have hearing parents? (Hint: Think about what kind of information this learning situation yields.) [4 pts]

(3) Sigmund was asleep the day domain-general and domain-specific knowledge were discussed in class.

(a) What is the difference between these two knowledge types? [2 pts]

(b) To help Sigmund understand this difference better, give him an example of domain-specific knowledge and an example of domain-general knowledge, making sure to indicate which is which. [4 pts]

(4) Sigmund has been examining the CHILDES database for examples of English past participles like “drunk” and “eaten”. He has not found any child speech samples containing the participle “written”. Can he conclude that the children in the database do not know the word “written”? Why or why not? [2 pts]

(5) On the island of the Guins, several immigrants from different language and cultural backgrounds have come to live and work together. Sigmund was hanging out around the new settlements and noticed that there was now a common language comprised of lots of other language parts, and this common language was spoken by all of the adult immigrants. Meanwhile, a different (though related) one was spoken by the children of the immigrants.

(a) Which language (that of the adults or that of the children) would be termed a pidgin? Why? [2 pts]

(b) Which one would be termed a creole? Why? [2 pts]

(c) Whose language (that of the adults or that of the children) would you expect to be more grammatically complex? Why? [2 pts]

(6) Sigmund has heard about different kinds of connections in the brain.

(a) What is a contralateral brain connection, and how does it differ from an ipsilateral connection? [2 pts]

(b) Which kind of connection is stronger in the human brain? [1 pt]

(7) Sigmund was amazed by split-brain patients, and wants to know more about what they can tell us about language in the brain. Give one piece of evidence from split-brain patients that demonstrates the functional asymmetry of the brain. So that Sigmund really gets the picture, be sure to explain (a) what a split-brain patient is, (b) what functional asymmetry is, and (c) how the evidence you describe demonstrates functional asymmetry. [8 pts]

(8) Sigmund is interested in what support there is for a critical or sensitive period of language acquisition. He has heard about “wild children” who don’t seem to have language, but doesn’t understand why this isn’t very strong support for language having a critical period. Give Sigmund one reason why those children aren’t the strongest support for a critical/sensitive period for language. [2 pts]

(9) Sigmund von Hackelstein has made up his mind to learn the language of the Teers, who live near the Guins. He assumes that after he has studied and used the Teer language for many years, he will be as proficient as a native speaker. Explain to Sigmund why this might not be the case. [4 pts]