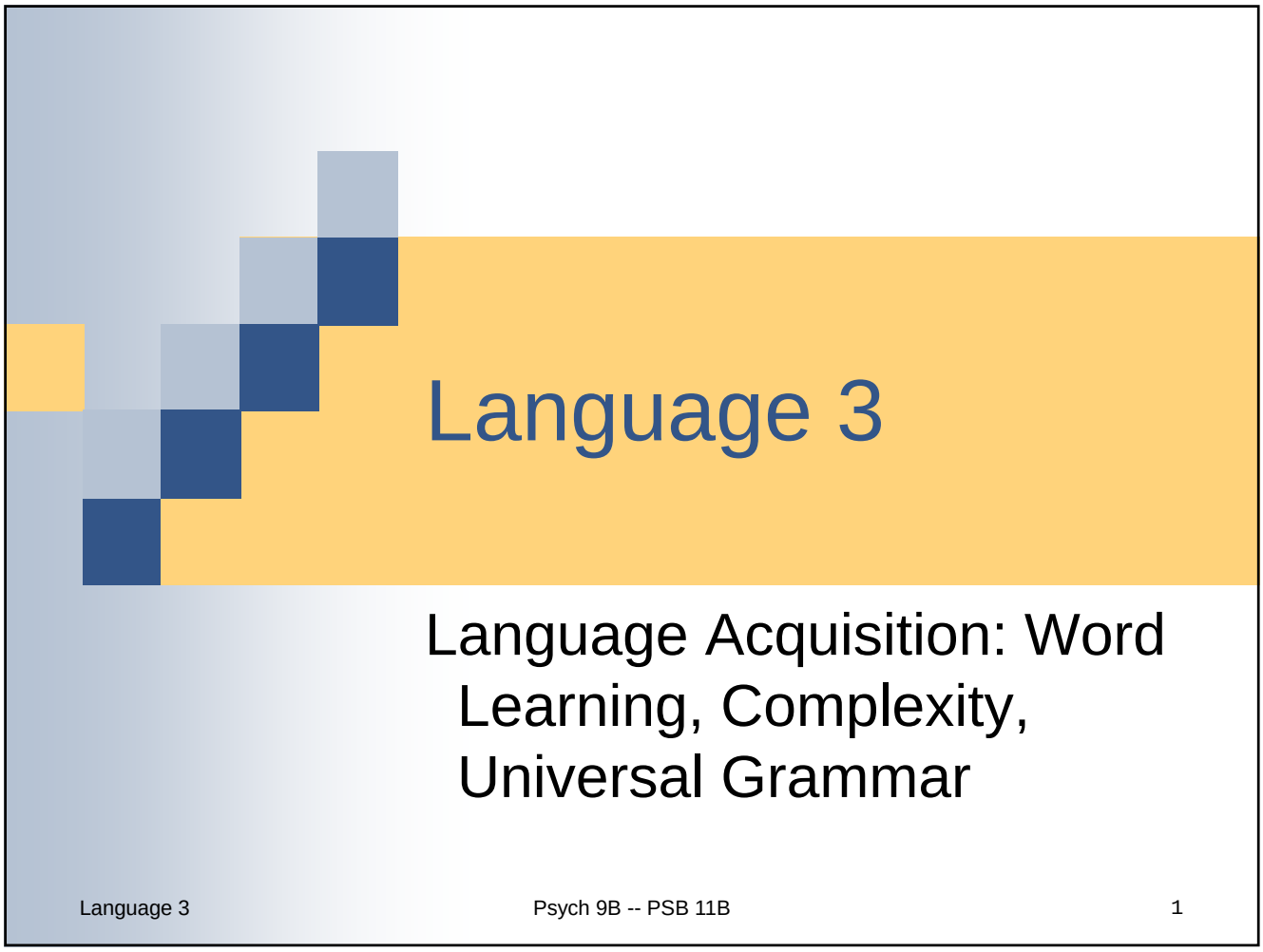
Language 3
Language Acquisition: Word Learning, Complexity, Universal Grammar
Language 3
Psych 9B -- PSB 11B
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Summary from Last Class

- Although simple learning mechanisms – imitation, conditioning, etc. – can explain many phenomena of language acquisition
  - It fails to explain language that is *creative* – not just imitative
- Another hypothesis is that the creative uses of language can be understood as resulting from analogy
  - However, analogy predicts errors that learners rarely if ever make
- By elimination, Chomsky proposed the hypothesis that, at least *some*, of our knowledge of language is ***innate***
  - Acquisition of aspects of language is better described as *maturation* rather than *learning*

- Does it puzzle you how,
  if so many aspects of language are innate,
  there exist so many different languages?

A. Yes

B. No

Word Learning (Clip 5)

- Key distinction
  - Words referring to a specific things or actions
  - Words naming a classes of related things
    "The trick of word meaning is correctly applying it to things other than the original referent."
- Children have innate biases when trying to identify what words refer to
  - The whole object assumption
  - The mutual exclusivity assumption

Key Point: Word Learning Differs from Rule Learning

- The process of word *learning* is different from the rest of language *acquisition*
  - A large, but finite number of words to learn
  - Identifying a relatively small number of *rules* allows us to comprehend and produce an infinite number of sentences

Summary: Menya and What they Help us to Understand (Clip 6)

- All the world's languages are complex
  - Regardless of level of technological complexity of the culture speaking it
- The world's languages all share organizational traits
  - Even where their speakers have lived in isolation from the world at large for millennia

Features Found in All Languages: Universal Grammar (Clip 7)

- Languages are structured in one of two ways to convey meaning
- Division of words into those which refer to objects and those which refer to actions
- A distinction between one and more than one object
- A way to indicate when actions happened
- A way to make things negative
- A way to ask a question

Universal Grammar (UG) is Biologically Deteremined (Clip 8)

- Human brain is pre-wired to accept only certain *kinds* of languages
- Those things that are true of all languages are the candidates for the components of UG
- Pinker: What children have to pick up is not the fact that languages have rules, but rather the particular *versions* of the rules the language they are acquiring has, e.g. whether the ordering of words put the verb before the object or the object before the verb.

Over-Regularization of the Past Tense (Clip 9)

- In English *regular* verbs form the past tense by adding the morpheme –ed
- Some verbs are irregular
- Initially, children learn the past tense of just a few verbs and they use the correct forms
- Later, children learn the rule for regular verbs and, initially, try to apply it to all verbs – over generalizing
- Eventually, they sort out the two verb classes

Regularity of Errors (Clip 10)

- The errors made by children learning languages are not random
- Observation/Claim: Children only produce “errors” that are consistent with UG
  - The errors that children make represent constructions that would be possible in some language, just not their own

Overall Summary: (Clip 11) Is *Language* Learned or Innate?

- Language: A set of *symbols* and *principles* for combining these symbols that allow for communication and comprehension.
- Answer – Both

  The elements of language form a continuum
  - Symbols (words) are learned
  - Principles (i.e., rules of syntax and mapping of semantics) are selected from "pre-wired" alternatives
  - Phonology is selected from whatever is available

Looking Forward

- Chapter test on Language is Wednesday
- For Monday
  - Gleitman: Ch. 10, pp. 408 – 421
- I do not have time for coffee today