

That's Not Baby Talk; It's Your Kid Testing Her Grasp of Chinese

By Sharon Begley

If a baby growing up in an English-speaking home squeals “a my pencil!” dad might correct him, saying, “That’s ‘my pencil,’ sweetie.” If a toddler points to an older brother and complains, “tickled me,” mom might say, “You mean, ‘Joey tickled me.’ And the toddler who declares, “I don’t want no spinach,” is told to say, “I don’t want any spinach.”

Yet, the first child is speaking perfectly grammatical Greek, the second is uttering correct Chinese and the third is speaking proper Spanish, argues linguist Charles Yang.

Not literally, of course. They are obviously speaking English words. But in a bold new theory of how children learn to speak their native tongue, Prof. Yang argues that the errors babies make are “entirely grammatical-in other languages.” In his new book “The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World,” he writes, “Children’s languages differs from ours not only because they occasionally speak imperfect English but because they speak perfect Chinese,” or German or Greek or...

The idea builds on Noam Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar, the seminal idea in linguistics. In 1957, Prof. Chomsky asserted that basic knowledge of how language works—that it is made of words, has nouns and verbs, and has rules to move words around (You are here to Are you here?)-is innate and resides ultimately in our genes.

Because every child, no matter her DNA, easily learns the language she was born into (“easily” relative to the effort needed to learn a second language as an adult, that is), universal grammar must be general enough to work for any tongue. That means each of the world’s 6,000 or so living languages is just a variation on the theme.

The variations arise from different values of about 50 so-called parameters, such as: Are double negatives OK? In what order do you put verbs, subjects and objects? For instance, Korean is subject-object-verb (I her see), English is subject-verb-object (I see her), Malagasy is verb-object-subject (see her I).

At first, their brain’s universal-grammar generator leads babies to try different parameter values at random. A baby learning English may say, Leah hit me! before hearing enough English to realize that the object precedes the verb.

“Only the grammar actually used in the child’s linguistic environment will not be contradicted, and only the fittest survives,” Prof. Yang writes. “Children learn a language by unlearning all other possible languages.”

This thesis is reminiscent of how the brain develops. It is born with a veritable jungle of neurons and synapses. Unused ones gradually fade away. In language, babies are able to hear sounds in foreign languages that their parents are deaf to. Most Japanese and Korean adults cannot distinguish the sound of l from the sound r; their newborns can. Eventually, that ability melts away. So, perhaps with grammar: a baby’s brain gradually deletes software for any language but her own.

It would take thousands of translators to identify which language’s grammar a child is trying out, but Prof. Yang, who will join the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania next month, has done it for us in his intriguing book.

Babies drop articles all the time, producing utterances such as I see cat. Russian, among other languages, does not use articles. A dog is barking is Laet sobaka, while, The dog is barking is Sobaka laet. English-speaking babies who say I see cat are using perfectly proper article-free (Russian) grammar with English words.

Even School-Age kids have trouble forsaking double negatives: I didn’t say nothing. Yet Greek is Dhen ipa tipota, or Not I said nothing. French, Hungarian and Japanese also use double negatives, as did Chaucerian middle English: Ther nas no man no wher so virtuous.

English moves question words such as what to the beginning of the sentence: What does Jon see? Chinese does not: Chengcheng yao shenme? Or Chengcheng want what? Hence a baby’s, Molly eat what?

Chinese is content to say xiayu for it rains; English demands the it. Babies point to the window and exclaim, Snows! According to the theory of trying out different parameters, this child has (unconsciously) faced the question, “Do you need to stick a fake subject in front of the verb?” and chose Chinese’s no instead of English’s yes.

Adults smile when children double question words, as in, What do you think what Elmo eats? In this case, they are “speaking” German, which says, Wer glaubst du wer die Bücher hat? or Who think you who the books has?

It is not the case that the grammars English-learning babies mistakenly try out are more basic. Babies learning German sometimes fail to double a negative, and babies learning other non-English languages stumble into English grammar, supporting the idea that every grammar is an equal variant of the universal one.

Nor are the mistakes babies make closer to some ancestral language. As far as linguists can tell, there is none. Languages popped up independently many times in human history, and still do. Listen closely and you might hear one in the making.

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