

The 2023 LSA Linguistic Institute

(333) Documenting the Acquisition of Indigenous Languages

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Course description

Explaining how children acquire language is a central goal of cognitive science. The problem is hard due to the diversity found at every level of human languages (Evans & Levinson 2009). An explanation for children's linguistic accomplishments cannot be achieved without an understanding of language diversity, and yet researchers have documented child language in fewer than 300 of the world's 7,000+ language communities. There is an urgent need to expand this dataset by documenting how children acquire thousands of indigenous languages. These languages possess 80.5% of the typological variation in human language including such features as out-of-control reduplication (Upper Chehalis, United States), harmonic pronouns (Lardil, Australia) and ballistic stress (Chatino, Mexico).

This course will introduce participants to a community-based model of acquisition research that includes working with indigenous activists and training indigenous speakers in the art of child language documentation and linguistic research. The community model strengthens local linguistic infrastructures while engaging with acquisition theories. Participants will prepare a grant application using community-based approaches that address the significance and broader impacts of research on the acquisition of indigenous languages.

The two-week course is divided into four sessions.

Session 1 provides an introduction to the scope and significance language diversity, and the implications of language loss for the study of child language (Davis et al. 2014; Evans & Levinson 2009; Kidd & Garcia 2022; Majid 2023; Pye 2021; Singh 2022). The goal of this session is to discover ways to present language diversity as a linguistic object, and to prepare a section of a grant proposal that demonstrates the significance of language diversity in relation to the planned research.

Session 2 will address practical issues in working with indigenous communities (Eisenbeiss 2006; Kelly et al. 2015; Pye 2022). The goal of this session will be to prepare a section of a grant proposal that demonstrates the feasibility of the project. The chief concern is to locate a language community and community members who are willing to work on the project. It is important to identify the goals of the community and how to

accommodate them. We will discuss ways that participants can locate a community member who can lead the project, and adjusting outcomes for the project relative to the level of training needed to achieve the outcomes. Another issue to address is the data that the investigator will collect, and the time needed to process the data. The methods used to collect the data must meet the cultural requirements of the community and the investigator's access to child speakers. We will address the best practices in documenting child language that are tailored to the community's linguistic needs. We will discuss the difficulties inherent to locating two-year-old speakers and working with their families. All of these issues are central to justifying a budget for the research. The assignment for this session will be to write a budget and a budget justification for the research. The budget should include payment to speakers as research assistants and payment to children's families. Finally, we will discuss the ethics of gaining consent for participation from families and children, and how to demonstrate consent to a funding agency.

Session 3 will be devoted to identifying analytical goals for the project and methods for achieving them. This session will cover how to demonstrate the scientific merit of the project. A key element for meeting this goal is recognizing the genius embodied in each language. We will demonstrate methods for analyzing child phonology, morphology, lexical categories, argument structure and discourse. We will discuss the limitations of working with small samples and how the analyses can be adjusted to yield maximum information from small samples. We will also consider how to expand this framework in order to work in several communities at the same time. The assignment for this session will be to identify specific features of a language for study and their implications for acquisition theory. Participants are encouraged to have a language in mind.

Session 4 will address the broader impacts of acquisition research in indigenous communities. We will discuss how the training of community members in recording, transcribing and archiving language data can be repurposed to strengthen the linguistic infrastructure of the community. We will discuss the production of language materials that can be shared with the children's families and community as well as how the results of the study can be used to support the revitalization of the local language, e.g., developing teaching materials, children's books, etc. We will workshop ideas in this session for archiving data and communicating the goals and products of the research to indigenous communities. The assignment for this session will be to write a data management plan.

This course is targeted towards researchers who are interested in expanding research on the acquisition of indigenous languages whether they are students or linguists with an interest in documenting language acquisition. The participants should have intermediate training in linguistics, but do not need special training in language acquisition.

Readings for Session 1

Required

- Evans, N. & Levinson, S. C. (2009). The myth of language universals: Language diversity and its importance for cognitive science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 32, 429-492.
- Hale, K. (1998). On endangered languages and the importance of linguistic diversity. In Grenoble, L. A. & Whaley, L. J. (Eds.), *Endangered languages: Language loss and community response* (pp. 192-216). Cambridge University Press.
- Kidd, E., & Garcia, R. 2022. How diverse is child language acquisition research? *First Language*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01427237211066405>
- Majid, Asifa. (2023). Establishing psychological universals. *Nature Reviews Psychology*. [<https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-023-00169-w>]. Accessed 3/9/23.
- Singh, L. (2022). From information to action: A commentary on Kidd and Garcia (2022). *First Language*. 42(6): 814–817. [doi:10.1177/01427237221090024].

Supplemental

- Davis, H., Gillon, C. & Matthewson, L. 2014. How to investigate linguistic diversity: Lessons from the Pacific Northwest. *Language* 90(4): e180-e226.
- Crystal, D. (2000). *Language death*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2014). Editorial. *Journal of Child Language*, 41, Supplement 1, v-vi.
- Hale, K. (1992). Endangered languages: On endangered languages and the safeguarding of diversity. *Language* 68(1), 1-42.
- Krauss, M. E. (1992). The world's languages in crisis. *Language* 68(1): 4-10.
- Mithun, M. (1998). The significance of diversity in language endangerment and preservation. In L. A. Grenoble & L. J. Whaley (Eds.), *Endangered languages: Language loss and community response* (pp. 163-191). Cambridge University Press.
- Thomason, S. (2015). *Endangered languages: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Readings for Session 2

Required

- Eisenbeiss, S. 2006. Documenting child language. In P. K. Austin (ed.), *Language Documentation and Description*, Vol. 3, 106-140. London, England: SOAS.
- Himmelman, N. P. 1998. Documentary and descriptive linguistics. *Linguistics* 36:161-195.
- Kelly, B. F., Forshaw, W., Nordlinger, R. & Wigglesworth, G. (2015). Linguistic diversity in first language acquisition research: Moving beyond the challenges. *First language* 35(4-5), 286–304.

Supplemental

- Demuth, K. 2001. Collecting spontaneous production data. In D. McDaniel, C. McKee & H. S. Cairns (eds.), *Methods for Assessing Children's Syntax*, 3-22. MIT Press.
- Stoll, S. 2015. Crosslinguistic approaches to language acquisition. In E. L. Bavin & L. R. Naigles (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of child language* (2nd ed., pp. 107–134). Cambridge University Press.
- Woodbury, A. 2003. Defining Documentary Linguistics. In Peter K. Austin (ed.), *Language Documentation and Description Volume 1*, 35–51. London: SOAS.

Readings for Session 3

Required

- Cook, E.-D. (2006). The patterns of consonantal acquisition and change in Chipewyan (Dëne Sųłiné). *International Journal of American Linguistics* 72(2), 236-263.
- Hellwig, B., Define, B., Kidd, E., Allen, S., Davidson, L. & Kelly, B. F. 2021. Child language documentation: The sketch acquisition project. In G. Haig, S. Schnell & F. Seifart (eds.), *Advances in corpus-based typology: State of the art. Language Documentation and Conservation* [nflrc.hawaii.edu/lcd/sp25hdl.handle.net/10125/74657].
- Mithun, M. (1989). The acquisition of polysynthesis. *Journal of Child Language* 16, 285-312.
- Pye, C. 2021. Documenting the acquisition of indigenous languages. *Journal of Child Language* 48(3): 454-479. [<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000920000318>].
- Pye, C. 2022. [Sketching Infant Grammars](#). Workshop on American Indigenous Languages, University of California, Santa Barbara, April 9, 2022.

Supplemental

- Ingram, D. (1981). *Procedures for the analysis of children's language*. Baltimore, MD: University Park Press.
- Ingram, D. (1989). *First language acquisition: Method, description and explanation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pye, C., Pfeiler, B. & Mateo Pedro, P. (2017). The acquisition of Mayan languages. In J. Aissen, N. England & R. Zavala Maldonado (Eds.), *The Mayan languages* (pp. 19-42). London: Routledge.
- Stoll, S. & Lieven, E. (2014). Studying language acquisition cross-linguistically. In H. Winkler & P. Pradakannaya (Eds.), *South and Southeast Asian psycholinguistics* (pp. 19–35). Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/cbo9781139084642.004.

Readings for Session 4

Required

- England, N. C. (2003). Mayan language revival and revitalization politics: Linguists and linguistic ideologies. *American Anthropologist* 105, 733–743. DOI: 10.1525/aa.2003.105.4.733.
- England, N. C. (2007). The influence of Mayan-speaking linguists on the state of Mayan linguistics. In P. K. Austin & A. Simpson (Eds), *Endangered languages* (pp. 93–111). Berlin: Helmut Buske.
- Fitzgerald, C. M. 2017. Understanding language vitality and reclamation as resilience: A framework for language endangerment and ‘loss’ (Commentary on Mufwene). *Language*, Volume 93(4): e280-e297.
- David Wilkins 1992. Linguistic research under aboriginal control: a personal account of field work in Central Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 12:171-200.

Supplemental

- Campbell, L. (2017). On how and why languages become endangered. *Language* 93(4), e224-e233.
- Flores Farfán, J. A., & Olko, J. (2021). Types of Communities and Speakers in Language Revitalization. In J. Olko, & J. Sallabank (eds.), *Revitalizing Endangered Languages: A Practical Guide*. (pp. 85-99). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grenoble, Lenore A. and Whaley, Lindsay J. (2005). *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hinton, L. (2001). The use of linguistic archives in language revitalization. In L. Hinton & K. Hale (eds), *The green book of language revitalization* (pp. 419–423). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Maxwell, I. J. (2019). Retamaxik ruk’utik ruka’n ta ch’ab’äl/Manual para la enseñanza de segundos idiomas. Guatemala: Editorial Maya’ Wuj.
- Olko, Justyna & Wicherkiewicz, Tomasz. (2016). Endangered languages. In Search of a Comprehensive Model for Research and Revitalization, in: “Integral strategies for language revitalization”, J. Olko, T. Wicherkiewicz, R. Borges (eds.), University of Warsaw 2016, (pp. 653-680).