

Children's Acquisition of Variable Grammar

Child language research has traditionally focused on aspects of grammar that are fixed or invariant. For example, in English we say *I ate the apple*, but not *Ate I the apple* with the grammatical subject 'I' after the verb 'ate'. Yet many grammatical patterns are in fact variable. For example, in Spanish, subject pronouns can be expressed or omitted, e.g., *yo comí la manzana* ~ *comí la manzana* both mean 'I ate the apple'. This type of grammatical variation is not random; it is constrained by numerous factors, resulting in complex probabilistic patterns that are highly systematic among adults. How do children acquire these patterns?

This talk presents research showing that development depends on child-internal factors and the nature of the input, including the frequency of the words and grammatical structures in child-directed speech. In addition, Dr. Shin will discuss why studying grammatical variation in children is important for understanding what it means to know a language, and she will argue that this approach is crucial for avoiding a deficit view of bilingual and bidialectal children's developing grammars.

Professor Naomi Shin

Wednesday, March 6, 2024

5:00 p.m., 103 Design Building



Naomi Shin is a Professor in the Department of Linguistics & The Department of Spanish & Portuguese at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Shin's research focuses on child language acquisition, bilingualism, and sociolinguistics. Her theoretical research examines how patterns of morphosyntactic variation are acquired during childhood and how they change in situations of language contact. Her applied work has focused on developing a sociolinguistic approach to teaching Spanish grammar. She co-directs the Lobo Language Acquisition Lab. Dr. Shin has been invited for the relevance of her work to heritage language learners and those learning various Louisiana dialects, including but not limited to African American English, Cajun/Creole English, and Southern White English.

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Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders, and the Department of Psychology
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
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