**Acquisition of Syntax**

This course gives an overview of core issues in current research on children’s acquisition of syntax. We will first take a look at models of first language acquisition and discuss their assumptions about the role of children's input, children's general cognitive abilities and children's innate predispositions for language acquisition. Based on this overview, we will discuss empirical studies on three core questions in research on children’s acquisition of syntax. We will discuss different theoretical approaches to these questions and the methods that are used to answer them. We will analyse actual recordings of preschool children's speech from the CHILDES database of child language (<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/> ).

**Lecture Topics**

1. **How adult-like are children’s early grammatical representations?**   
   Do they involve the same grammatical categories (e.g. articles, auxiliaries, etc.) or are they mostly based on formulas like “I want X” or “That’s a X”?
2. **How do children learn which verbs can appear in which constructions?**For instance, why can you say “I told you a story”, but not “I said you a word” – and how can children learn that?
3. **When and how do children learn when to choose which word order or construction?**For instance, why do adults typically prefer *the horse’s leg* (vs. *the leg of the horse*), but *the leg of the chair* (vs. *the chair’s leg*)? Do children show the same preferences? What is the role of factors like animacy in children’s language processing?

**Required Readings**

Ambridge, B. & E.V.M. Lieven (2011) *Child Language Acquisition: Contrasting theoretical approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge UniversityPress. (in particular chapters 1, 4, 6, 7.1)

Eisenbeiss, S. (2015.) *Syntax and Language Acquisition.* In T. Kiss & A. Alexiadou (Eds.): *Syntax* – *Theory and Analysis. An International Handbook* (Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science 42/3) (pp. 1792-1833). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.   
preprint: <https://www.academia.edu/1220666/Syntax_and_Language_Acquisition>

The special issue of the journal *Linguistics 47*(2), in particular the articles by Behrens (2009) and Eisenbeiss (2009)

**Data Sets and Tools**

Students are encouraged to bring their own laptops and to download transcripts of the THOMAS and the Manchester corpora from the CHILDES database (<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/data/Eng-UK/> and <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/data/Eng-UK-MOR/> ). The CLAN tools for analyzing CHILDES data can be downloaded here <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/clan/>.

For CLAN tutorials see <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/> (see Program > Tutorial) and <https://experimentalfieldlinguistics.wordpress.com/teaching/fieldexperiments_software/>

**Further Readings for Topic 1**

<http://brainblogger.com/2015/02/25/the-determiner-wars/>

Eisenbeiss, Sonja (2000): The Acquisition of the DP in German. In L. Rizzi & M-A. Friedemann (Eds.): *The Acquisition of Syntax. Studies in Comparative Developmental Linguistics* (pp. 27-62)*.* Harlow: Longman.

Pine, J., Freudenthal, D., Krajewski, G., & Gobet, F. (2013). Do young children have adult-like syntactic categories? Zipf’s law and the case of the determiner *Cognition, 127* (3), 345-360.

Pine JM, & Martindale H (1996). Syntactic categories in the speech of young children: the case of the determiner. *Journal of Child Language, 23* (2), 369-95.

Valian V, Solt S, & Stewart J (2009). Abstract categories or limited-scope formulae? The case of children’s determiners. *Journal of Child Language, 36* (4), 743-78.

Tomasello, M. (2000). The item-based nature of children’s early syntactic development. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *4*(4), 156-163.

**Further Readings for Topic 2**

Bidgood A., Ambridge, B., Pine, JM., & Rowland, CF. (2014) The retreat from locative overgeneralisation errors: A novel verb grammaticality judgment study. *PLoS ONE* 9(5): e97634.

Blything, R. P., Ambridge, B., & Lieven, E. V. (2014). Children use statistics and semantics in the retreat from overgeneralization. *PloS ONE*, *9*(10), e110009.

**Further Readings for Topic 3**

Cannizzaro, C.L. (2012). *Early word order and animacy* (Doctoral Dissertation), retrieved from <http://www.let.rug.nl/~hendriks/papers/cannizzaro.pdf>

Skarabela, B., & Serratrice, L. (2009). The doctor’s mother’ or ‘the mother of the doctor’?: Syntactic priming of possessive noun phrases in English preschoolers. *Online Supplement of the Proceedings of the Boston University Conference on Language Development*. (Available via researchgate)