

Worksheet 6.2: First Language Acquisition

Acquisition of Morphemes

The most common 14 morphemes are acquired between the ages of 18 months and 4 years. During this time, children produce systematic errors that show that they have worked out a rule from the adult language. Once they know the rule, they tend to apply it to most other words of the same category. For example, when a child works out that you form the past tense of a verb by adding **-ed** to the stem, they apply this rule to both regular and irregular verbs:

play + past tense → *played*

break + past tense → *breaked*

From the point of view of the adult language, **breaked* is ungrammatical since it is an irregular verb.

These errors are interesting in that they inform us how children acquire language. A child who says *breaked* cannot simply be imitating the adult language: adults don't normally say *breaked* (they say *broke*). However, all children, including those of highly educated parents produce these overregularisation errors. Children produce these deviant forms because they look for general, systematic patterns in the language. It is fair to say that during this stage, the child language is more systematic and regular than the adult language. Children have discovered the rule (add **-ed** to the verb stem to form the past tense), but they haven't yet learned all the exceptions to the rule (the irregular verbs and their past tense forms).

- A. The table below contains a list of irregular English verbs. Predict what a child during the overregularisation stage might say instead of the correct adult form:

swam		sang	
drove		was	
caught		had	
built		began	
ran		fought	
put		held	
brought		rang	
gave		took	
made		taught	
grew		did	
has		is	

B. The following table contains a list of irregular English nouns and adjectives. Work out which rules the child has learned and how they might overregularise these rules in the examples below. Predict what the child might say during the overregularisation stage:

Nouns		Adjectives	
sheep		better	
mice		further	
feet		worst	
children		worse	
women		best	
geese		least	
teeth		less	
fish		more	
lice		most	
oxen			

Solutions to Worksheet 6.2

A Verbs

swam	<i>swimmed</i>	sang	<i>singed</i>
drove	<i>drived</i>	was	<i>be(e)d</i>
caught	<i>catched</i>	had	<i>haved</i>
built	<i>builded</i>	began	<i>beginned</i>
ran	<i>runned</i>	fought	<i>fighted</i>
put	<i>putted</i>	held	<i>holded</i>
brought	<i>bringed</i>	rang	<i>ringed</i>
gave	<i>gived</i>	took	<i>taked</i>
made	<i>maked</i>	taught	<i>teached</i>
grew	<i>growed</i>	did	<i>doed</i>
has	<i>haves</i>	is	<i>bes</i>

B Nouns and Adjectives

Nouns		Adjectives	
sheep	<i>sheeps</i>	better	<i>gooder</i>
mice	<i>mouses</i>	further	<i>farer</i>
feet	<i>foots</i>	worst	<i>baddest</i>
children	<i>childs</i>	worse	<i>badder</i>
women	<i>womans</i>	best	<i>goodest</i>
geese	<i>gooses</i>	least	<i>littlest</i>
teeth	<i>tooths</i>	less	<i>littler</i>
fish	<i>fishes</i>	more	<i>manyer</i>
lice	<i>louses</i>	most	<i>manyest</i>
oxen	<i>oxes</i>		

