These two books on how children learn their first language differ vastly in accessibility and topic. Guasti (G) assumes some familiarity with “concepts developed in linguistic research” (xi), but that turns out to mean “the generative theory of Universal Grammar” (1)—clearly the unmarked case for introductory linguistics courses in much of the world. While G meets the less well-read reader halfway with a summary of background assumptions at the start of each chapter, readers will still find most of the chapters hard going if they are not at home with analyzing sentences in terms of Determiner Phrases, Inflectional Phrases, and Complementizer Phrases, for example. One does well to handle concepts such as syntactic binding comfortably already, too, even though its principles are briefly summarized—and, for those acquainted with “c-command” and “domain,” clearly summarized at that.[1] (A short glossary helps somewhat, but still assumes a lot of knowledge of current Universal Grammar (UG) terminology.) Bloom (B), by contrast, equally scholarly in his writing, is readily accessible to educated readers even without any background in linguistics or psychology. G advances the generative linguistics student’s knowledge of theories of the timing of children’s acquisition of various principles of UG, and how differences between children’s and adults’ grammars can be expressed in UG terms. For interested readers in general, including parents of young children, B opens up a fascinating range of ideas about “how children learn the meaning of a word” and much more: “certain nonlinguistic mental capacities, including how children think about the minds of others and how they make sense of the external world” (2).

As to topic, G gives a chapter each on phonology and lexicon, but (as the subtitle suggests) focuses on syntax; B deals with syntax chiefly in considering claims about how children use
syntactic cues to help with word learning, but—again as the title implies—focuses on lexicon: how children acquire not only words, but also concepts.

What about usefulness for fieldworkers in descriptive linguistics and language development? Neither book aims at helping you figure out the syntactic, lexical, or other structures of language X, but both do give you plenty of ideas of some interesting things to be listening and looking for, especially in listening to children of various ages—G for syntax, B for lexicon. The phenomena discussed are also things you need to know about for adult versions of language X—things like the respective distribution of reflexive and personal pronouns, scope of quantifiers, structure of wh-questions, extension of meanings of existing forms to cover new concepts (obviously of special relevance for translators). But books on child language acquisition are not designed to be the best references to consult to periodically check your understanding of the current questions and answers on such things.

Now for some specifics: After an introduction of some basic concepts in chapter 1, G’s chapter 2, “First Steps into Language,” covers infants’ perception of speech sounds, and a little on production—including deaf infants’ “manual babbling,” which starts at around 6–8 months, just as hearing infants’ vocal babbling does. The fact that infants learn early to distinguish among languages in their environment on the basis of suprasegmentals may be of interest to those working in situations of high multilingualism and language contact. Phonologists may want to look further into the evidence presented from infants’ speech perception that “the syllable or the vocalic nucleus is the universal unit of representation in the initial stages of language development” (39).

Chapter 3, “Acquisition of the Lexicon,” deals with how children segment a speech stream into “word-sized units” and how they associate meanings with word forms. The “phonological bootstrapping” model argues from infants’ abilities in phonological discrimination (e.g., newborns discriminate between stimuli that do or do not include a prosodic boundary, 9-month-olds “are sensitive to the phonetic and phonotactic properties of native-language words” [74]) that infants use acoustic cues to identify word-sized units.

This is the chapter that overlaps the most with B’s book, and the two authors do not always agree. G, for example, reports the often-adduced “vocabulary spurt,” when children are said to be “learning between five and nine new words a day” starting at around 20–24 months and going up to age 6 (81). By contrast, B (39–43), while acknowledging that children do acquire new words at a faster rate than adults do, denies that there is any “spurt” in the sense of a significant increase in their rate of acquisition. On the other hand, G and B agree that children use syntactic cues to help them figure out the meaning of some words.

In G’s chapter 4, “The Emergence of Syntax,” we learn that by the time, around 2 years of age, that children start combining words into longer utterances, they already know a lot about what the language they’re aiming at is like: whether it’s head-first or head-last, for example, and how subject-verb agreement works. On the other hand, in many languages their speech deviates from adult speech in the use of verb root or infinitive forms in many cases where adults use fully inflected, finite forms.
Chapters 5–10 deal in turn with the development of specific components of adult grammar: null subjects, *Wh*-movement, NP-movement, binding principles, quantification, and control, respectively. It comes through clearly that child language acquisition research, while driven to a large extent by current questions in grammar in general (such as Universal Grammar), in its turn brings to light data that contribute to the more general investigation into the nature of our human language capacities. Even without grasping all the details, one can clearly see that those capacities develop at a surprisingly early age—we are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made”—though some adult grammar features, such as the notion of “control” needed for correct interpretation of pronouns, take longer to mature than others.

The last chapter, 11, “Dissociation between Language and Other Cognitive Abilities,” describes two syndromes, one in which otherwise cognitively normal children have deficiencies in their language development, and the other in which the reverse is true, showing that language ability and general cognitive ability do not always proceed together. Clearly those arguing that our language ability is not simply a special application of a general problem-solving ability but is, rather, something specific to language will find ready support here.

G’s presentation of material provides an example worth following for other textbook authors: each chapter begins with a brief statement of the chapter’s topic and the order of its subtopics; besides a summary of linguistic development at the end of each chapter, intermediate summaries are given frequently at the end of major sections within chapters; each chapter also ends with Further Reading, a list of Key Words, and a set of Study Questions.

B’s writing is likewise exemplary, but in a different way: he introduces abstracts and generalizations through concrete examples, even narrative, as in this beginning of Chapter 1:

It looks simple. A 14-month-old toddles after the family dog, smacking it whenever she gets close. The dog wearily moves under the table. “Dog,” the child’s mother tells her. “You’re chasing the dog. That’s the dog.” The child stops, points pudgy hand at the dog, and shrieks, “Daw!” The mother smiles: “Yes, dog.” (1)

From there we are led into B’s thesis: that, far from being a memorization of associations between forms like *dog* and things like dogs, “children’s learning of words, even the simplest names for things, requires rich mental capacities—conceptual, social, and linguistic—that interact in complicated ways” (1).

In contrast to the suggestion in the last sentence about G’s chapter 11 above, B’s elaboration of his thesis on p. 10 does not require an innate ability specific to word learning:

Word learning really is a hard problem, but children do not solve it through a dedicated mental mechanism. Instead, words are learned through abilities that exist for other purposes. These include an ability to infer the intentions of others, an ability to acquire concepts, an appreciation of syntactic structure, and certain general learning and memory abilities.
This last quote obviously bears on the question of how normal or how deviant nonliteral language usage is—again, an important issue in hermeneutics and exegesis. (The swing today is toward considering nonliteral usage as central, not normal, to language use.) This is just one area where this book about children has implications for many other issues in linguistics and the philosophy of language. To take only one example, chapter 10, “Words and Concepts” (241–259), develops the claim that “rich abstract thought is possible without words, and much of what goes on in word learning is establishing a correspondence between the symbols of a natural language and concepts that exist prior to, and independently of, the acquisition of that language” (242). For its implications about a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and for its reference to several abilities of children not mentioned here, the following paragraph (244) is worth quoting in full:

So language could, at least in principle, have an influence on nonlinguistic thought. But does it? The problem with radical linguistic determinism is its premise that human thought is unstructured prior to language. This just isn’t true; as reviewed in previous chapters, babies have a rich mental life. For instance, they know a lot about objects. They expect them to continue to exist even when they go out of sight, can predict their trajectories, can determine the numerosities of small arrays of objects, and can compute the results of simple additions and subtractions performed over these arrays. They do not see the world as a “kaleidoscopic flux of impressions” (or the “blooming buzzing confusion” of William James). And so Whorf was wrong when he said that the categories we see in the world do not “stare every observer in the face.” Actually, at least some of them do.

Notes

[1] If you’re not at home with these concepts, a fairly recent and clear exposition of them, based on earlier well-known textbooks on generative syntax, is Carnie 2002.

References