Notes for the first two classes

The focus of the course is the following pair of questions:

1. How do children acquire language?
2. What does it mean to acquire a language?

It’s easier to answer the second question first. To acquire a language is to acquire a knowledge of the rules of that language. This knowledge takes the form of a mental grammar. We can look at some simple examples of the rules of English (to be precise, Standard American English):

- A simple sentence consists of a subject followed by a verb optionally followed by an object.
- In order to make the plural of a noun, add an /s/ sound to the end (e.g. /kæt/ to /kæts/).
- If the subject of a sentence is singular and the sentence is in the present tense, the verb must have the ending “-s” (“I walk,” but “John walks”).

A person must know these rules (and a great many others) in order to speak English. Clearly, children do not know these rules when they’re born, but they somehow manage to acquire more-or-less all of them by the age of 5 or 6. Two possibilities:

- General learning mechanisms (however exactly these work).
- “Growth” in the sense Chomsky uses the term in the video.

What could it mean to say that language “grows” in a child? Chomsky is saying that like the development of the arms, legs, liver, heart, etc., the development of a child’s language abilities is almost entirely pre-programmed. Whatever environment a child grows up in, its body will develop according to the plan specified in human DNA. Similarly, whatever linguistic environment a child grows up in, it will develop a language according to the same genetically-specified plan.

Undoubtedly, some aspects of the child’s linguistic knowledge will be affected by the environment (e.g. it will learn English, French, Japanese or whatever depending on what the community speaks). Similarly, some aspects of its physical development will be environmentally determined (its height, for example, will be partially determined by its diet). Chomsky’s argument is that in both cases, the effect of the environment is quite superficial. In other words, if we don’t say that children “learn” to have two arms from their environment, why would we say that they learn their native language from their environment? It follows that there should only be superficial differences between (say) French and Turkish. During the rest of the course (particularly the last week), we will try to show that this counterintuitive conclusion is may actually be correct.
Of course, Chomsky doesn’t expect us to take his word for it. He has some arguments for thinking of language acquisition in terms of growth rather than in terms of learning. The most important argument is that languages have rules that are far too subtle and complicated for a child to figure out just using its general know-how. For example, look at the following four sentences (the last one is bad):

1. I sent a letter to John.
2. I sent John a letter.
3. I sent a letter to New York.

The problem with (4) is as follows. In sentences of the form “John gave X Y”, X (whatever it is) has to be a person. This is true for many other verbs that work like “give”:

5. John threw the ball to Bill.
6. John threw Bill the ball.
7. John threw the ball to the ground.
8. *John threw the ground the ball.

John, of course, is a person, so (2) sounds fine, but since it is difficult to think of New York as a person, (4) sounds very odd. How could a child figure this out? It seems they’d have to have some kind of advance knowledge of how various kinds of verb work. This is what Steven Pinker argues in more detail in the video linked to on the course website (see “optional extras” section of http://ling.umd.edu/~alexd/Summer09_ling240/).