

Center for Cognitive Science

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

280 Park Hall
North Campus
2:00 pm – 4:00 pm

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"Current Controversies in Language Acquisition"

It is often thought that the main controversy in Language Acquisition is whether or not the ability to learn human language is innate to humans. However, this is incorrect. The ability to learn human language is innate by definition, since it is species specific (only humans learn human language) and is species general (all normally developing humans with normal input learn human language). The real question is WHAT is innate which allows humans to learn language. Answers to this question range from: general learning mechanisms, general cognitive/perceptual abilities, learning strategies specific to language, a Language Acquisition Device which is specific to morphosyntax, among others. In this tutorial, designed for the general Cognitive Science audience, I will lay out some of the assumptions behind these various claims about innateness, and then discuss what sorts of data would be needed in order to support or argue against the various notions of innateness. Finally, I will discuss a few of these data sources in some detail (e.g. Specific Language Impairment), and indicate which of the theories of innateness these facts most clearly support.

Refreshments will be available.

Open to the public.