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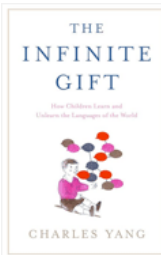
FAMILY: SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE AT HOME.

The Infant Grammarian

THE GENIUS OF BABY TALK.

By *Emily Bazelon*

Posted Saturday, Aug. 26, 2006, at 1:58 AM ET



My 3-year-old son, Simon, sees no point in the *to be* verb. "This my Superman costume," he says. "Where my Batman boot?" I've always assumed he's just making a small-child's mistake, and if I don't correct him, that's mostly because it's too much bother. According to a new book by the Yale linguist Charles Yang, however, Simon is mirroring the grammar of a different language. Hebrew doesn't bother with *is* or *are*. When kids leave out the subject in the sentence "Where going?" they're thinking like a speaker of Chinese, which drops topic words in some contexts.

Like almost everything in linguistics, Yang's idea stems from Noam Chomsky's theory that the human capacity for language is innate. Chomsky identified a "universal grammar," meaning a way language generally works, that humans are born with. Other linguists argue that the distinctions among languages can be described by a few dozen rules, or parameters, that involve binary choices: In English you state the subject; in Chinese you sometimes don't. And so, Yang argues in his new book, *The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World*, that the mistakes Simon and his peers make aren't the processing difficulties of an immature brain. They're the trial and error children go through as they discard the structure of other languages in favor of their own. "Only the grammar actually used in the child's linguistic environment will not be contradicted, and only the fittest survives," Yang writes.

The idea is a clever one. But aspects of it have met with skepticism since other linguists started working in this area years ago. Most children have the rudiments of English grammar down by their third birthday, even if they don't use it. And research has shown that they are surprised and put off when adults mimic childlike speech. Ask your 2- or 3-year-old "Want go school?" and he's likely to make a face at you. "Kids seem to know they're speaking funny and differently from adults," says Paul Bloom, a psychologist at Yale who thinks the errors of baby talk are about short attention span and poor articulation, not parameters or grammars.

Still, Chomsky praised Yang's work and book via e-mail, and Yang's ideas may explain some of the speech patterns of small children. And he reinforces a point that there's other support for: Children carry the tools of speech with them and can sort out the finer points of language with less

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