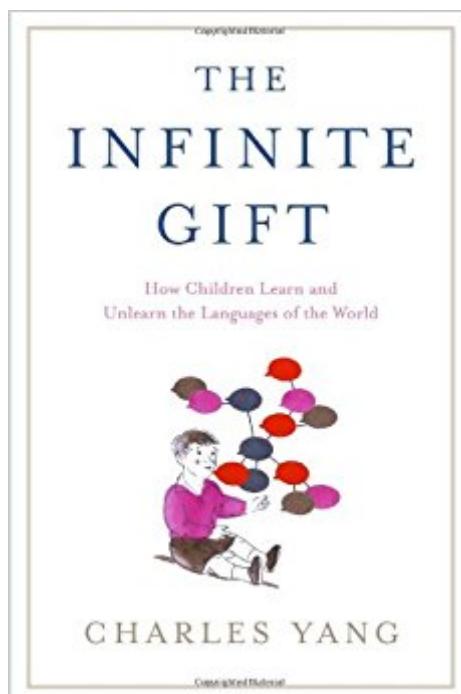


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The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn And Unlearn The Languages Of The World



Synopsis

A child's very first word is a miraculous sound, the opening note in a lifelong symphony. Most parents never forget the moment. But that first word is soon followed by a second and a third, and by the age of three, children are typically learning ten new words every day and speaking in complete sentences. The process seems effortless, and for children, it is. But how exactly does it happen? How do children learn language? And why is it so much harder to do later in life? Drawing on cutting-edge developments in biology, neurology, psychology, and linguistics, Charles Yang's *The Infinite Gift* takes us inside the astonishingly complex but largely subconscious process by which children learn to talk and to understand the spoken word. Yang illuminates the rich mysteries of language: why French newborns already prefer the sound of French to English; why baby-talk, though often unintelligible, makes perfect linguistic sense; why babies born deaf still babble -- but with their hands; why the grammars of some languages may be evolutionarily stronger than others; and why one of the brain's earliest achievements may in fact be its most complex. Yang also puts forth an exciting new theory. Building on Noam Chomsky's notion of a universal grammar -- the idea that every human being is born with an intuitive grasp of grammar -- Yang argues that we learn our native languages in part by unlearning the grammars of all the rest. This means that the next time you hear a child make a grammatical mistake, it may not be a mistake at all; his or her grammar may be perfectly correct in Chinese or Navajo or ancient Greek. This is the brain's way of testing its options as it searches for the local and thus correct grammar -- and then discards all the wrong ones. And we humans, Yang shows, are not the only creatures who learn this way. In fact, learning by unlearning may be an ancient evolutionary mechanism that runs throughout the animal kingdom. Thus, babies learn to talk in much the same way that birds learn to sing. Enlivened by Yang's experiences with his own young son, *The Infinite Gift* is as charming as it is challenging, as thoughtful as it is thought-provoking. An absorbing read for parents, educators, and anyone who has ever wondered about the origins of that uniquely human gift: our ability to speak and, just as miraculous, to understand one another. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Children may start to speak at a year, but that's hardly the beginning, as Yale linguist and psychologist Yang shows in this engrossing book. Babies recognize the first elements of language before birth, start to babble at three to four months and can memorize and recognize the sounds of words at six to nine months. Yang uses this fascinating progression to explain one of the core theories of contemporary linguistics: Noam Chomsky's universal grammar, that human understanding of language is in the genes. Yang takes the theory a step further in arguing that the keys to acquiring language are not in the learning, but in unlearning: "Viewed in the Darwinian light, all humanly possible grammars compete to match the language spoken in a child's environment.... This theory of language takes both nature and nurture into account: nature proposes, and nurture disposes." Yang unfolds this complex argument systematically and with appealing animation, using creative examples—his son's first word, neurological experiments, baseball analogies—to keep the narrative moving. For readers who will never venture into the field to study language acquisition, he reveals that some of the most exciting linguistic experiments are happening much closer to home. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Charles Yang teaches linguistics and psychology at Yale University. Trained as a computer scientist at MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, he has written extensively on children and language and contributes articles to The London Review of Books, among other literary publications. He lives in Delaware with his wife, a frequent research collaborator, and young son, a frequent research subject.

Must read it.

This was required for my Ling50D class and was a captivating read on the mind and language, I recommend to linguists everywhere!

Despite my own lack of linguistic training I did not find this dry. The writer has an engaging, conversational style, and makes the technical aspects accessible to all. (If you can make tree-diagrams seem compelling, you have achieved something special.) A good book for parents curious about language development, and amateur-linguists alike.

This is a great book if you want to have an informed view while you watch your (grand)children learn their native language. It is fascinating to watch children do just what current theory says they will do! This book is mainly for people who are used to thinking about technical and abstract stuff. I already knew a little about the subject and found the book at just the right level -- the author communicates the basic ideas but does not get bogged down in excessive detail.

The book interprets the current research on language acquisition for the non-academic. There is a lot of meat here. While it's presented in a very readable way, it is not for the casual reader. It gave me a better understanding of how grammar as an organizing concept plays out in first language development and once established provides impediments to learning subsequent languages. For someone interested in languages, there is a lot of food for thought, such as the compounding of words in Eskimo and that the vowel shift that we see in the US is also observable in the speeches of Queen Elizabeth II. The last chapter on the superiority of the German language lost me. As a non academic, I don't have the tools to refute the thesis. It would seem, though, that even on the hypothetical desert island, to predict the surviving language, more variables than grammar should enter into the equation. English (a grammatical child of German) did survive Latin and French on the Islands of Great Britain. I'd be interested in a discussion of the commonly considered factors (adaptivity, King Alfred, literature, etc) against grammar.

I often used to wonder, given that the cognitive revolution happened all the way back in 1956, why weren't there more popular books on linguistics (and indeed other cognitive abilities). This great book fills the gap beautifully. Yang writes in a very engaging, often funny manner, without making big claims. He provides plenty of references and gives concrete examples and references to experiments which provide persuasive evidence for the fact that our language ability is based on an

innate system. All in all, Charles Yang has written a great book.

I got interested in linguistics by reading Steve Pinker's books. But what I learned after reading this book is some of the things Pinker presents as settled cases are actually not so settled. In the Infinite Gift, Yang presents a view of language acquisition that seems different than Pinker on the surface, until you realize the language instinct is more about how kids learn language in total while this book applies more specifically to the acquisition of grammar. I highly recommend reading this and the Language instinct, especially to those who have kids and view them at least partially as little labs for learning about language acquisition. I think the two books together are much better than either alone.

In this wonderfully readable and compelling book, Charles Yang, a noted professor of linguistics now at Penn, uses evidence from children's babbling, biology, neuroscience, and historical literature to provide deep insights into the nature and origin of language and how children accomplish the remarkable feat of learning a language. The book is clearly written and understandable to a broad audience, and poses and answers some of the key questions about understanding what makes humans unique.

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