



# Lectures on Language Acquisition and Linguistic Theory



Presented by

**Professor Kenneth Wexler**  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Date/ Time:	Topic:
March 13, 2017 (Monday) 10:30am-12:15pm	Research on Language: Linguistics or Psychology? A seminar on methodology Venue: Arts and Humanities Hub at G24 of Fung King Hey Building
March 13, 2017 (Monday) 4:30-6:15pm	Current Issues in the Development of Phases Venue: Swire Hall 1 of Fung King Hey Building
March 14, 2017 (Tuesday) 4:30-6:15pm	Current Issues in the Development of Binding Venue: Swire Hall 1 of Fung King Hey Building

## Speaker:

Professor Kenneth Wexler is currently Emeritus Professor of the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy of MIT. He received his PhD in Psychology from Stanford, and worked at University of California at Irvine as Professor and Director of UCI's Sloan Foundation center for cognitive science before moving to MIT in 1988, where he served as Co-Director of the MIT National Science Foundation Research Training Group in Language: Acquisition and Computation. In his early career, Professor Wexler became renowned for his work on the mathematical theory of language learnability, culminating in the demonstration of degree-2 learnability. Among his major achievements are the demonstration of very early knowledge of binding theory and the maturational theory of grammar. Wexler's establishment of Very Early Parameter-Setting and the existence of the Optional Infinitive Stage are a central component of the now standard approach to early morphosyntactic development. His results on Specific Language Impairment created seminal ties to Biolinguistics.

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# Research on Language: Linguistics or Psychology? A Seminar on Methodology

Presented by



**Professor Kenneth Wexler**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Date: March 13, 2017 (Monday)

Time: 10:30am-12:15pm

Venue: Arts and Humanities Hub at G24 of Fung King Hey Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

## Abstract:

There will be a brief lecture on the question of the experimental method in linguistics and psycholinguistics, including acquisition. What should be the relation between psychological approaches and linguistic approaches? I conclude that the most sophisticated experimental approaches to language may now very often be found within linguistics proper. Psycholinguists can use some experimental approaches that were first originated in psychology (as psychology can use some that were first originated in linguistics), but there is no one-way relation here. The major issue concerning the nature of science is not what experimental methods are used (the general answer is obvious: use the most appropriate for the question) but rather – do we have a model that makes predictions and that can be criticized and changed theoretically? Here there is no contest. With respect to the question of language studies, linguistics provides a model, a theory, of the type one finds in the hard sciences. Psychology does not. I don't believe that this is a necessary outcome; it just descriptively states the current content of psychology.

Experimental topics to be covered (drawn from the literature and my own work) include questions of the development (and adult use of) focus particles, questions concerning the nature of the theory of semantics (which types of logical operators/quantificational elements are there?), the on-line processing of unaccusatives, and the nature of the development of scalar implicatures. The idea, however, is that there be much discussion, detailed if possible, rather than a pure lecture format.

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# Current Issues in the Development of Phases



Presented by

**Professor Kenneth Wexler**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Date: March 13, 2017 (Monday)

Time: 4:30-6:15pm

Venue: Swire Hall 1 of Fung King Hei Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

## Abstract:

Much discussion has centered on issues involving the development of what are traditionally called A-chains. In a more empirically adequate and contemporary approach, the developmental hypothesis has been stated as:

*Universal Phase Requirement (UPR):* Until maturation (around age 7), children's grammars take all phasal positions to be non-defective.

UPR has been shown to explain why these structures are late, i.e. developing around 7-8:

- (1) verbal passives
- (2) some languages show even later development of passives
- (3) subject to subject raising
- (4) representation of unaccusatives (only currently empirically controversial one of these claims)
- (5) specificational copulas
- (6) object clefts

Much earlier development is predicted by UPR for:

- (7) adjectival passives
- (8) short object scrambling

We will go on to current work examining other issues involving phasal development. First, we will see how UPR (and current syntax) explains why ditransitive subject control verbs are late (9). We will also discuss the syntax and development of tough movement (10), another late development, showing how its development also follows from Hicks' syntactic analysis plus UPR. I will present some recent unpublished collaborative work (with Loes Koring) attempting to test the disjointness effect for verbal passives (11). This and (rather directly), recent studies by Gavarro and Perramon (2017, Catalan) and Oliva and Wexler (mss. replicating for Spanish) show that in fact the interpretive properties of young child passives are adjectival rather than verbal.

- (9) Mary promised Bill to leave (who will leave? Mary for adults, often Bill for kids)
- (10) This doll is tough to see (is this doll being seen (adults)? Or seeing? (often for kids))
- (11) John is being dressed (the dresser is other than John for adults; kids often allow John to be the dresser)

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# Current Issues in the Development of Binding



Presented by

**Professor Kenneth Wexler**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Date: March 14, 2017 (Tuesday)

Time: 4:30-6:15pm

Venue: Swire Hall 1 of Fung King Hei Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

## Abstract:

This talk centers around contemporary research on the development of binding theory, both disjointness effects binding (Principle B) and necessary binding (Principle A), considering challenges to the classical view. It teases apart the original pragmatic account of the Apparent Delay of Principle B Effect (ADPBE) (1) (Wexler and colleagues) from memory-based challenges to it in the work of Reinhart and colleagues.

(1) Donald Duck is pointing to him (him can't be DD for adults, but can be DD for kids)

From the beginning (Wexler and Chien 1985), it was argued that the probable cause of the child's error is not a deficiency in Principle B but rather a referential/pragmatic problem for the child. The basic datum supporting this view is that when the pronoun is clearly bound, the child makes many fewer errors.

Conway et al (2009) claimed that children don't show an ADPBE, so long as the contextual situation is set up "correctly". Hartman, Sudo and Wexler (presented at BUCLD), noticed that in Conway et al's experiment, the crucial pronoun in (1) was pronounced as 'em, a reduced form of the pronoun. 'em is a *clitic*, necessarily being bound by an antecedent. If kids know this property (extremely likely) then they will bind 'em. The only plausible antecedent is the subject of the sentence, which rules out the sentence by Principle B. Errors are not expected. Hartman et al replicated Conway et al's experiment, with 2 conditions, using *him* in one condition, *em* in the other. As predicted by the classical theory, but at odds with the "infelicity" theory, kids made very few errors of local binding on *em* but many on *him*.

An important comparison seeks to find evidence that distinguishes between the pragmatic and memory models of the cause of the ADPBE. Children with SLI are known to have memory problems but not large pragmatic problems. Children with Williams syndrome (WS) have the opposite pattern: large pragmatic problems but no particular memory problems. Perovic and Wexler (2016, *Language Acquisition*) showed that on pronouns, children with WS did quite poorly, violating the constraint against local co-reference, whereas matched children with SLI made very few errors. Thus, pragmatics, not memory, is the cause of ADPBE. Neither impaired group shows any difficulties with the c-command constraint on the antecedent of a reflexive (unlike children with autism or Down syndrome). Thus there is not a general grammatical deviance for WS for binding theory.

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