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Your baby's babble is straight from the textbook of our universal grammar

SCIENCE NOTEBOOK BY ANJANA AHUJA

MY FAILURE TO learn another language has always been a personal regret but I had hoped that motherhood would afford me a second chance. Reading that infants have a natural capacity for languages, I decided that my toddler, now 4, and I would acquire a second language together.

Which one would be most useful? Hindi? My extended family speak perfect English. Mandarin or Cantonese? Way too tricky. Spanish? Useful for communicating with a large percentage of the world's population, and handy for the Canaries. Plus, this was the mother tongue of Dora the Explorer, the slightly simple cartoon character that my daughter had taken a shine to. Bingo!

Now I've discovered that we may be four years too late. According to one linguist, babies are born with the capacity to learn any language, but this plasticity withers as they concentrate on their mother tongue. Charles Yang, of the University of Pennsylvania, argues in a new book that babies are born with the templates for all languages in their brains, and that the underused templates are gradually discarded. In *The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World*, Professor Yang suggests that "nature proposes, and nurture disposes".

Most intriguing is his observation that seemingly grammatically incorrect baby babble will usually be grammatically correct in another language. Baby babble, he infers, is the infant trying out various templates to see which one "works" (by eliciting claps, hugs and other signs of approval). So a sentence that seems to be a jumble of verbs and nouns when spoken in English, may well be correctly ordered in another language.

Take, for example, the double negative, a favourite grammatical error among very young children. "I don't want no vegetables", is a standard cry. It isn't perfect English, but it is textbook Spanish. Another common, early mistake is dropping the definite article: "I want puppy." Several languages, including Russian, do not feature articles.

Yang's theory takes, as its starting point, Noam Chomsky's enduring idea that there is a universal grammar embedded in the infant brain. Yang suggests that

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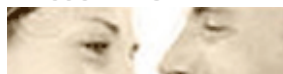
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mixed-up baby talk is the toddler tossing out different variations of that universal grammar.

This news means, alas, that the Spanish lessons are on hold. *Así es la vida.*

• LB1 IS FAST becoming the most hotly disputed skeleton in palaeontological history. The remains belonged, it was claimed in 2004, to a new species of ancestral human being living 18,000 years ago. Other scientists have countered that the 3ft-tall *Homo floresiensis*, also called the hobbit, is not a new hominid species but either a pygmy or a human being suffering from microcephaly (a serious disorder that shrinks the brain and sometimes also stunts growth). The academic clash is thrillingly ill-tempered; warring scientists have described each others' work as rubbish.

The original claim that *Homo floresiensis* was a miniature species of human being living in Indonesia at the same time as *Homo sapiens*, came from Peter Brown and Mike Morwood, of the University of New England, in Australia. Nonsense, says Teuku Jacob, of Gadjah Mada University, in Indonesia. In a paper published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) last week, he writes that 140 anatomical comparisons with human specimens show that LB1 was a modern human being with important genetic deformities. The hobbit, Professor Jacob and his co-authors insist, is not that anatomically different from the Rampapasasa pygmies living near the cave where LB1 was excavated.

Professor Brown complains that the PNAS paper is "unsupported by any published research". He says that Jacob's inability to point to a modern skeleton that matches the stature of the hobbit proves that LB1 deserves a hominid classification all of its own.

The dust is far from settled. A forthcoming paper in the *Journal of Human Evolution*, by researchers of the Australian National University, makes cranial comparisons with various other skulls — belonging to healthy human beings, microcephalic human beings, pygmies and other hominid species — and suggests that LB1 may well be a new species of hominid after all.



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