

Lobo Language Acquisition Digest

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Who we are

The Lobo Language Acquisition Digest is produced by the Lobo Language Acquisition Lab at the University of New Mexico's Department of Linguistics. We aim to foster synergy among researchers and community members who have a vested interest in child language development and multilingualism.
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LLA Researchers Present at Indigenous Language Institute Symposium

The Indigenous Language Institute (ILI) hosted their annual symposium at Sandia Resort and Casino on October 22-24 under the theme 'The Healing Power of Language'.

Student researchers from different working groups in UNM's Lobo Language Acquisition Lab, Language Documentation Lab, and Indigenous Child Language Research Center were in attendance to present research posters and learn from the many voices there. Melanie Kirk-Lente and Kayleigh Russell presented on the ongoing documentation of Pueblo Hand Talk. Vianne Basulto and Nicholas Underwood each presented on different aspects of ongoing research on demonstratives in two Indigenous Amazonian languages, Secoya and Ticuna. Akasha Khalsa and Melanie Kirk-Lente presented on a summary of key child language development research findings that are anticipated to be useful for Indigenous language nests. See p. 7 for more about ongoing research at the LLA Lab.

Researchers from LLA Lab stand with former Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland at the 2025 Indigenous Language Institute Symposium. From left to right: Akasha Khalsa, Vianne Basulto, Nicholas Underwood, Deb Haaland, and Melanie Kirk-Lente.



New team tackles Grand Challenge: Multilingualism Matters

As part of UNM's larger Grand Challenges program, which seeks to stimulate impactful research and address issues that are vital to New Mexico and the world at large, a new interdisciplinary team has been formed to tackle the importance of multilingualism. The team, called Multilingualism Matters, is one of several new Level 1 teams for 2025. The team's mission is "to support New Mexico children's engagement with multiple languages through our scholarship and community outreach efforts. We conduct and disseminate research on language access, development, and use in multilingual communities."

"Grand Challenges are problems of global, national and regional significance that require researchers to work together across disciplinary boundaries to develop and implement solutions."
UNM Grand Challenges

Co-convened by Assistant Professor of Speech & Hearing Sciences Dr. Carlos Irizarry-Pérez and Professor of Linguistics and Spanish & Portuguese Dr. Naomi Shin, the team seeks to address three main questions. Firstly, what support currently exists in NM for helping children who speak another language other than English maintain and/or develop their non-English language, and what is lacking? Secondly, what are some current gaps in our understanding of multilingual development that need to be filled to inform curriculum design and assessments of multilingual children's language skills, as well as to support families trying to encourage home language usage? Finally, what are some ways families, communities and teachers can encourage non-English language usage?

Crucial for the team's success is its interdisciplinary nature. It is convened by professors Carlos Irizarry-Pérez and Naomi Shin in the separate fields of Speech & Hearing Sciences and Linguistics, respectively.

Meanwhile, as other permanent members, Dr. Morford brings extensive research



The Multilingualism Matters team from left to right, Jill Morford, Melvatha Chee, Kendal Jacobson, Carlos Irizarry-Pérez, Naomi Shin, and Isaiah Koishe

experience on bilingualism with signed languages among Deaf communities, and Dr. Chee brings extensive research experience on childhood acquisition of Indigenous languages. Fresh perspectives are added by student research assistants Kendal Jacobson and Isaiah Koishe.

"The Multilingualism Matters team will work to increase understanding of linguistic diversity and language development by focusing on bilingual children, including those with language delays, deaf children acquiring signed languages, and Indigenous children acquiring their traditional languages."
UNM Grand Challenges

Prior to being officially introduced during the 2025 Grand Challenges Day, the team had already begun work on compiling a resource list of all multilingual education programs in the state of New Mexico. Future work will expand on these themes.

The team recently convened a group of about 30 people, including faculty from UNM and representatives from community organizations, to discuss how their work relates to the Team's mission and goals. As a result of this convening, several people are joining forces to spearhead projects that will advance the Multilingualism Matters mission.

Multilingualism Matters will also host a panel during UNM's Research and Discovery Week. The panel will take place on Nov. 7 from 2-3 pm in Ortega Hall, room 335. All interested are encouraged to attend.



Dr. Melvatha Chee receives 2025 Research and Creative Works Leadership Award

The UNM Office of the Provost selected Associate Professor Melvatha Chee as one of four faculty to be celebrated with the 2025 Research and Creative Works Leadership Award. This award “acknowledges faculty, who at the time of promotion to associate or full professor, have achieved especially significant impacts in their field.” This is certainly true of Dr. Chee, who runs UNM’s Indigenous Child Language Research Center and has published ground-breaking work on childhood acquisition of Indigenous American languages, as well produced multiple corpora of contemporary and historical Navajo.

Dr. Chee is Tsé Nahabílnii, Kin Łichii’nii, Hooghan Łání and Áshjǫ́hí, a Diné woman from Lake Valley, New Mexico. Alongside her research, she teaches Diné language at UNM’s Navajo Language Program, interprets for the U.S. Department of Justice, and translates ballots for the state of New Mexico.

During her talk at the 2025-26 inaugural Lightning Lounge, celebrating the recipients of this award, Dr. Chee discussed how, when she began research into child language acquisition, she was excited to learn about how children acquired Navajo. However, she soon discovered that almost no research had been conducted on Indigenous child language development. So, she embarked on making research into child language

acquisition of Diné language a reality. She began with her dissertation, *A Longitudinal Cross-sectional Study on the Acquisition of Navajo Verbs in Children Aged 4 years 7 months Through 11 Years 2 Months*.

Her talk, entitled “11 hours per minute: Developing Indigenous Child Language Research”, focused on the extremely labor-intensive process of coding child language data in Navajo. This work involves student research assistants, community speakers of the language, and staff at the Saad K’idilyé language nest.

Dr. Chee’s Recent Research:

Chee, M. R. 2025. Navajo Verbs in Child Speech. *Journal of Child Language*, 52(5), 1010-1035.

Chee, M. R., Yazzie, T., Smith, R., Lycan, B., League, C., & Goldberg, A. 2025. *Prioritizing community-researcher relationships to vitalize child language research.*

Denk, L., & Chee, M. R. 2025. *Diné Language Corpus.*

Chee, M. R., Jones, F. V., Morford, J. P., & Shin, N. L. 2023. *Usage-Based Approaches to Child Language Development: Insights from Studies of Navajo, ASL, and Spanish. The Handbook of Usage-Based Linguistics*, 379-392.

Chee, M. R., & Henke, R. E. 2023. *Child and child-directed speech in North American languages. The Languages and Linguistics of Indigenous North America: A Comprehensive Guide, Vol. 2, 13, 741.*

Q&A with a specialist

Bettie Petersen

Early Intervention, New Mexico School for the Deaf

Bettie T. Petersen, Ph.D., earned her doctorate in Educational Linguistics from UNM and works in the Early Intervention department at the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD). She visits families across New Mexico who have Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) children to advise them on language development in the home. On September 19, she visited the Lobo Language Acquisition Lab to talk about her extensive experience.

Q: At what point do DHH children receive intervention? How is it initiated?

A: When a baby is born, their hearing is screened. If a follow-up diagnostic test shows a permanent hearing difference, they can get Early Intervention (EI) here in NM. EI spans from birth to 6 years old. NMSD gets the referral, and we contact the family to set up a first visit to explain the services we provide, which are support during the diagnostic process, listening and device use, spoken and signed language, etc.

If the child is not identified until later—say when entering preschool or kindergarten—the referral comes from the school.

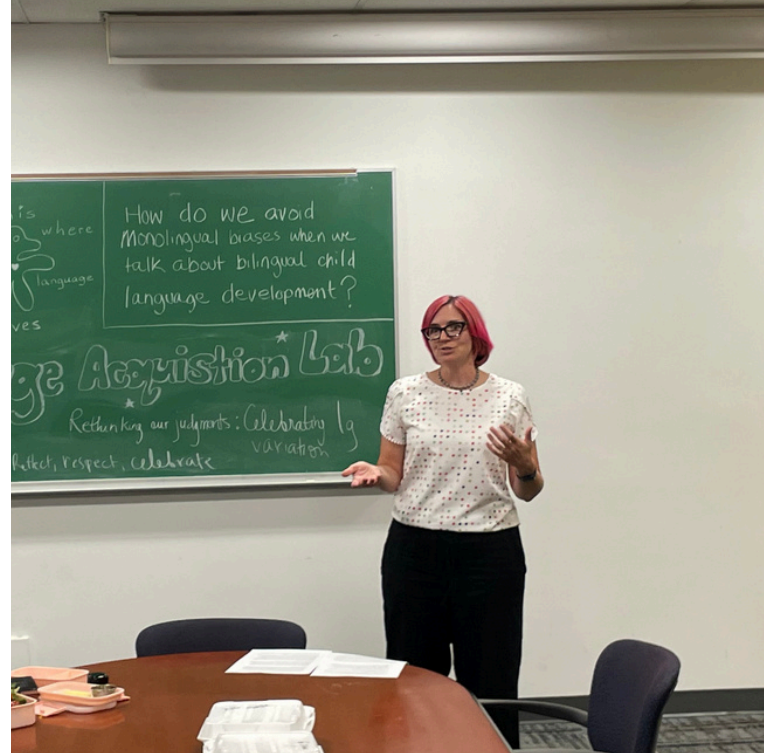
Q: What does intervention look like?

A: We focus our language and learning on daily routines, activities, places, and people. We are family-focused and home-based. Each child and family is unique, and each visit is different. We try to play to the family's strengths while recognizing their challenges. For example, foster care, large families, caregivers working multiple jobs, inconsistent housing or income, grief, family pressure, etc., can present challenges.

I believe families are doing the best they can with what they have. Accessing available resources increases success. Services end at 6 years old or when a family feels secure in their ability to advocate for their child and their language accessibility needs are being met.

Q: What are some of the language development outcomes and milestones for DHH children at different ages?

A: The earliest language acquisition begins with attending and understanding. This can



be observed in things like seeing mom come when they cry, seeing a bottle being prepared and calming down because they know that means they will be fed, and crying to say they want food or a diaper change.

Sign language acquisition follows a similar trajectory to spoken language. It starts with sign babble, then one-word utterances, two-word sentences, etc. These milestones can sometimes happen earlier or later. It all depends on language access.

Learning outcomes follow the needs of the child and family. For example, "I want my child to be able to tell me what she wants to eat" or "I want my child to use both signs and speech."

As for literacy, before 3 we do pre-literacy activities such as interacting with books, simple fingerspelled signs, identifying shapes, recognizing the first letter of their name, using a picture list to get groceries, etc. For multilingual kids, like kids in Spanish-speaking homes, we use pictures, English print, Spanish print, as well as signing.

Q: What language development assessments are used with DHH children?

A: In EI, we use 3 language assessments normed on DHH children. The first is the SKI-HI Language Development Scale (LDS), which can be used from birth to 5 years. Then we have the MacArthur (MB-CDI) and the Visual Communication and Sign Language checklist (VCSL). Both LDS and MB-CDI can be used to assess any language the child uses (spoken or signed) and takes the "higher" of the two or sorts out which modality/language is used by the child.

The VCSL is specific to a signed language. The VCSL begins with visual attention skills and moves to formal signs and grammar. The MB-CDI is more focused on vocabulary development, and the LDS is the most comprehensive, including a wide range of receptive and expressive language skills. The LDS was developed using a variety of language assessments and adapting items to account for gestures and signs. It allows for variation in skills by requiring only half of the items in each unit to be met to progress to the next level.

Q: What languages are DHH children in New Mexico learning?

A: DHH children in NM are learning any languages they have access to. Access involves a lot of things though. If they can't hear the language, they may not learn to speak the language. If they can access parts of the language through ASL, they may do that. They will learn to be literate in a printed form of English and any other printed language, for example Spanish.

Whether they dominantly speak or sign also depends on language access! What does the family use at home? Can the child hear/see the language? What is their hearing level? What language do they use at school? Whether they become balanced bilinguals or not depends on these factors as well.

Something people don't often realize is that a DHH child who knows ASL and is literate, is bilingual. Basically, all Deaf adults who use ASL are bilingual because they are literate.

Q: What role does lipreading play in acquiring English for DHH bilingual children?

A: Lipreading is a tool, or skill, that is useful for some DHH individuals, particularly those who already know a spoken language. Only about 65% of the message can be understood with lipreading alone - even for the best lipreaders. Lipreading alone is not sufficient to allow DHH children to learn a spoken language.

Q: And what about Signed English for helping to acquire written English?

A: Signed English is also a tool—not a language. There are so many factors to consider when supporting a family as they attempt to be a language model for their child. The short answer is that I advocate for using fingerspelling as the bridge from ASL to written English literacy.

Q: Are the students enrolled at NMSD receiving additional intervention services, or is there another way that the students engage in community with their peers?

A: Our Santa Fe campus has residential and non-residential students and offers a wide variety of extracurricular activities. We also offer summer programs for any DHH kid in NM—regardless of whether they attend NMSD.

Q: How many DHH children receive services from NMSD?

A: EI serves about 265 families all over NM. NMSD campuses serve over 180 students in Farmington, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe. Our outreach team supports DHH students in their home schools. They did 496 consultations to families last year to describe our services. The total number of DHH kids in NM is not known to us.

Q: Is the school publicly funded?

A: Our services are funded by both federal funding under part C of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as well as state funding. There is no charge to families—ever.

Further Reading:

Wilkinson, E., & Morford, J. P. (2020). How bilingualism contributes to healthy development in deaf children: A public health perspective. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 24(11), 1330-1338.

Mayberry, R. I., & Squires, B. (2006). Sign language acquisition. *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, 11, 739-43.

Herbert, M., & Pires, A. (2020). Bilingualism and code-blending among deaf ASL-English bilinguals. In *New Trends in Language Acquisition Within the Generative Perspective* (pp. 99-139). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Goodwin, C., & Lillo-Martin, D. (2023). Deaf and hearing American Sign Language—English bilinguals: Typical bilingual language development. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 28(4), 350-362.

Swanwick, R. (2016). Deaf children's bimodal bilingualism and education. *Language Teaching*, 49(1), 1-34.

Did you know?

Many bilinguals grow up thinking their language skills are less-than

by Akasha Khalsa

"I'm not very good at either language."

"I never completely learned English or Spanish."

These are some of the things my close friend says to me when she's feeling insecure about being bilingual. Yet, all evidence points to her being fully competent in both languages. She often fluently code-switches with other bilinguals, navigates complex interpersonal situations in Spanish, and completes high-level university assignments in English. So why is she so down on her own language skills? It turns out that among bilinguals, negative attitudes about their own bilingualism are pretty common. Where do these ideas come from?

Some early linguistic research claimed to show a negative impact on cognition from childhood bilingualism. These studies also operated under the inaccurate assumption that monolingualism, not bi- or multi-lingualism, is the norm of human language development and acquisition. Based on that incorrect assumption, ideas of "perfect" bilingualism held bilinguals to a standard of being "two monolinguals in one person" (Grosjean 1989, p. 3).

Unfortunately, these ideas were spread before further research disputed them. Meanwhile, in the United States, beginning in the 1800's and continuing through the present, ideas of "English Nativism" equated speaking English with being American, and attitudes towards bilingualism shifted from positive (at least towards immigrant languages if not Indigenous languages) to negative (Fitzgerald 1993). Proponents of "English Nativism" adopted and disseminated the disputed research findings on the supposed disadvantages of bilingualism.

Messages from teachers, media, family, and peers often still reflect ideas about bilingualism being damaging or inferior, despite the fact that they have been disproven. These attitudes are remarkably impactful, shaping kids' self-concepts and their perceptions of their language skills.

With all that taken into account, it's no wonder my friend feels like her language skills are less-than.

So how can we combat these harmful

myths about bilingualism and replace them with grounded facts?

Of course, we can familiarize ourselves with the evidence that bilingualism is not harmful to children's development, but rather can have positive effects on cognition (see Forrest 2022). Bilingual children, when given adequate exposure to each language, can be expected to become fully competent in both.

Of course, a bilingual person's strongest areas of vocabulary may differ between their languages depending on which situations they find themselves using them. But this is not a reflection of one's competence or fluency; rather it is a perfectly natural consequence of how vocabulary is acquired.

Combatting negative views towards multi-lingualism is crucial, especially in educational and childcare settings (see Shin et al. 2024). When interacting with bilingual children, it is helpful to know the concept of *harmonious bilingualism*, which is a sense of well-being from being able to use more than one language (De Houwer 2020). This framework helps to shift the narrative so that bilinguals can view their multiple languages as resources which add to their lives and experiences.

References & Further Reading:

[Check out LLA Lab's Online 'Combatting Linguistic Bias' Professional Trainings](#)

[De Houwer, A. \(2020\). Harmonious bilingualism: Well-being for families in bilingual settings. Handbook of home language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors, 18, 63-83.](#)

[Fitzgerald, J. \(1993\). Views on bilingualism in the United States: A selective historical review. Bilingual Research Journal, 17\(1-2\), 35-56.](#)

[Forrest, A. \(2022\). Rethinking Difference: How Bilingualism Research Helps Us Combat Linguistic Bias. Soleado.](#)

[Grosjean, F. \(1989\). Neurolinguists, beware! The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person. Brain and language, 36\(1\), 3-15.](#)

[Shin, N., Eliza Forrest, Audriana Saucedo, Dawnadine Harvey, & Jill P. Morford. \(2024\). Grappling with Linguistic Bias in the Classroom. Soleado.](#)



Ongoing research at LLA

Bilingualism and cognition

LLA Lab is taking part in an exciting three-year experimental research project titled "Addressee effects in demonstrative systems across bilingual communities". Led by Dr. Naomi Shin and Dr. Rosa Vallejos-Yopán of UNM and Dr. Amalia Skilton of the University of Edinburgh, this research is funded by a [National Science Foundation grant](#).

Data are being collected from three bilingual communities. These include Secoya-Spanish and Ticuna-Spanish bilinguals in the Amazon, and Spanish-English bilinguals in New Mexico. The study seeks to understand how bilinguals' cognition is affected by their dual linguistic systems by investigating how speakers use demonstratives (such as "this" and "that" in English) in different contexts and in both their languages. All languages have demonstratives, but they vary in how many exist and how they are used.

Pueblo Hand Talk

Dr. Jill Morford and her team received a 2025-2026 Community-Based Research Award from UNM's Center for Regional Studies to support their project *Pueblo Hand Talk: As Old As the Spoken Word*. Dr. Morford works with lab members Melanie Kirk-Lente, Kayleigh Russell and La Ban Hendricks and signers from the Zia Pueblo to document Indigenous ways of signing that predate ASL.



Indigenous child language

Directed by Dr. Melvatha Chee, the [Indigenous Child Language Research Center](#) focuses research on language revitalization.

The Shiyázhí Yáłti' project is based on audio recordings of child speech production, collected from children ages 4-11. Current work revolves around coding and analyzing these recordings. Future work will concern child-directed speech as well.

The Indigenous Child Language Research Center is also collaborating with Saad K'idilyé, a Navajo language nest located in the city of Albuquerque. As a community-oriented project with the goal of developing a better understanding of childhood acquisition of Diné Bizaad, it investigates the speech of adults talking to children in the nest, as well as the first words and gestural communication of those same children.

Our ethos

The LLA Lab was founded on core principles that guide our research programs and the products we aim to create for our community. The first is that all forms of language are variable, adapting to the environments in which they occur. Moreover, **all varieties of language are valid**, with no one variety being "clearer" or superior than any other. Nevertheless, our society at large nevertheless privileges certain types of language, and so we aim to **combat linguistic biases**. The second principle is that bilingual children acquire the language varieties present in their environment and are thus influenced by various factors related to the languages they experience. Additionally, bilingual children's language use has unique properties as a result of their bilingual interactions.

