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Widening the contexts of language acquisition

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A comprehensive theory of language acquisition must explain how human infants can learn any one of the world's 7000 or so languages. As such, an important part of understanding how languages are learned is to investigate acquisition across a range of diverse languages and socio-cultural contexts. To this end, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural language research has been pervasive in the field of first language acquisition since the early 1980s. However, on our best estimates we only have acquisition data from around 1% of the world's languages (Lieven & Stoll, 2010). In this talk I review the nature of this evidential base and then discuss new emerging acquisition research that has made links with the documentary linguistics community. I argue that, although such research poses considerable challenges, these are outweighed by the potential benefits to both the participating communities and to the discipline.

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