When spontaneous speech recordings do not provide sufficient data, researchers usually develop more targeted experiments, where children must provide specific responses in controlled situations. For instance, in production experiments, children might be asked to describe pictures one by one, producing one sentence per picture. In comprehension experiments, children might have to select pictures that match a particular sentence — for instance, the one where Sue’s mother’s father’s dog in the family picture is black and not the one where Sue’s father’s mother’s dog is black. Such experiments provide larger amounts of relevant data than spontaneous speech; and they allow researchers to systematically manipulate a range of variables. For instance, you can investigate whether children prefer s or of when the possessor is animate (Sue’s leg vs. the leg of Sue) or when it is inanimate (the table’s leg vs. the leg of the table). However, very young children are often unable or unwilling to follow a strict experimental procedure. They might also struggle with complex tasks and picture materials. So, when researchers investigate how young children learn to produce complex constructions, they often develop so-called “elicitation” games that “draw out” language, i.e. encourage participants to use the words and constructions they were interested in while keeping the recording situation engaging and natural.

Designing a good language game involves several decisions. First, you have to decide whether your game should be form-focused or meaning/concept-focused. For instance, you might want a game where speakers use the s-possessive form or you might want a game where speakers talk about a particular concept like possession, using a variety of constructions with s or of or with possessive pronouns like my. You could also develop a broad-spectrum game with a communicative situation that encourages speakers to encode a broad range of meanings, using a variety of forms and constructions.

The second decision for game designer concerns the communicative situation: in any language game, speakers must feel they have to use language and cannot simply keep quiet, grab things or point to them. Linguists use three types of tasks to achieve this: In speaker/listener-tasks, participants provide information for someone without access to this information. For instance, they could describe a picture or video that they have just seen to someone who was not present. While this usually works well with adults, turning this into a fun game for children is not easy, even if you work with silly puppets that always run away or retreat into their shells at the most interesting point in the video. This task also requires some memorization, making it difficult for younger children. In director-matcher
tasks, speakers do not simply convey information to passive listeners. Rather, they "direct" their "matchers" so that they can recreate a display or scene, find a particular object in a set of objects or follow other instructions. Such tasks can be turned into games quite easily. For instance, two speakers can be given a map and compete giving their respective "matchers" instructions for manouevring through a maze, creating a building, etc. As such tasks can be quite challenging and frustrating when "matchers" does not immediately understand their instructions, researchers prefer to use co-player tasks for young children. Here, players have to exchange information and coordinate actions to achieve goals, e.g. finishing a puzzle.

Finally, game-developers have to make concerns their materials: they tend to use static stimuli like photos, drawings or toys when they focus on objects and their properties. Dynamic stimuli like videos or animations are typically employed for games requiring descriptions of movements or complex events. Most sets of materials involve some form of contrast that requires a precise description to uniquely identify an object, action or event. For instance, when a game involves pictures with a big blue balloon, a big red balloon, a small blue balloon and a small red balloon, speakers have to refer to both colour and size of the balloon when they want others to hand over a specific picture. Realistic stimuli like photos or real-life videos work with both adults and children. We mostly use abstract stimuli such as cartoons or colourful drawings for studies with children or when we want to show scenes or objects that cannot be easily created with real actors, e.g. pictures with a pink and a green chicken.

After employing language games in my research for years, I now encourage my students to develop language games for their projects. They all prefer game development to reading text books and agree that it teaches them a lot more about the properties of a language and the types of situations and materials that encourage communication. As students need to find appropriate materials, discuss game ideas with others and use different software packages to create and present their stimuli, they also develop their IT, research and communication skills—and they can show the results of their work to potential employers in the educational or creative sector. In fact, developing games can easily be incorporated into work placements in schools or other educational or clinical settings.

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The Puzzle Game
Players ask for puzzle pieces with pictures that they can put into cut-outs of a puzzle board that show matching pictures. Pictures differ minimally from one another, so that players must mention the differences to identify specific pieces. Differences between pictures can require players to use specific forms or constructions. For instance, objects with different properties encourage the use of colour and size words, for example the big red balloon vs. the big blue balloon vs. the small red balloon, etc. Alternatively, one can investigate how learners encode particular meanings. For instance one can depict “giving” events and study which constructions learners use to talk about them; for instance give something to someone.

The Bag Game
This is a broad-spectrum multi-player task for young learners. It involves a bag with pockets in different sizes: colours and textures, for instance, brown, small and furry vs. white, big and smooth. These pockets can be used to hide animals or other objects that also differ with respect to colour and size, for example, the small brown horse vs. the big white horse. Pockets can be closed using zips, buttons, ties, etc.; and young children will need to ask for assistance to put things into pockets. This game requires children to refer to different animals, colours, sizes, and textures; and it encourages them to talk about locations and directions.

The Picture-Pairing Game
A set of picture cards is lying face down and players take turns turning pairs of cards over. When the uncovered cards match, the player can keep the two matching cards and get another turn, until all cards are paired. The game is similar to the classic Memory game, but pairs are not identical. Pictures can contrast, requiring the use of specific descriptions, for instance, a small balloon vs. a big balloon. Alternatively, picture combinations can be used to elicit complex constructions. For instance, the combination of a crown and a queen card could be described as the queen’s crown.