Childish Things and Grown-Up Words. Children Language Acquisition as Echoes of Adult Speech in *Peanuts*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the language of *Peanuts* as a site for reflecting on key theories of language acquisition, drawing on Piaget's cognitive developmental model, Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective, Skinner's behaviorist framework, and Chomsky's nativist approach. In addition, the study incorporates insights from more recent research in usage-based, statistical, and pragmatic models of acquisition to complement these foundational theories. Schulz's child characters display both sophisticated lexical choices and humorous distortions, illustrating how cognitive growth, social interaction, reinforcement, and innate linguistic competence intersect in the construction of meaning. The analysis combines developmental and linguistic frameworks with preliminary insights from comics theory – McCloud's concept of "closure" and Groensteen's spatial semantics – through a close reading of selected, paradigmatic strips. The paper argues that *Peanuts* not only mirrors children's linguistic growth but also visualizes the cognitive and pragmatic mechanisms through which meaning emerges, making Schulz's work a subtle reflection on how language is both acquired and performed.

Keywords: Child Language Development, Cognitive Growth, Comics Semiotics, Language Acquisition, *Peanuts*

Introduction[1]

Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip is famous for its gentle humor and philosophical depth but also for the apparent simplicity of its visual style. Beneath this apparently simple surface lies a striking linguistic phenomenon: a world in which children speak with remarkable eloquence, adopting the idioms, structures, and logical patterns of adult discourse. At times, the

[1] All the strips here mentioned can be retrieved at: <https://peanuts-search.com/> (11/2025)

characters repeat such language without fully grasping its meaning; at other times, they display insights that surpass those of the adults around them. However, this mimicry is not merely comedic, it functions as a subtle critique of adult speech,[2] exposing its contradictions, its pretensions, and its often hollow moralizing.[3] By partially appropriating and often misapplying adult expressions, Schulz's child protagonists emerge as inadvertent satirists, reflecting the linguistic (but also social) quirks of the adult world. Yet, although they occasionally speak with striking maturity, they remain unmistakably children. Schulz exploits this tension to explore how the young absorb, distort, and reanimate the language of their elders: "Charlie Brown and his friends may sound precocious, but the strip nonetheless preserves the innocence, the dreams, and the aspirations as well as the trials and insecurities of childhood. *Peanuts* makes childhood universal without making it adult" (Harvey 2022, n.p.).

Schulz's stroke of genius lies in this tension (and balance) between the adoption of adult-like expressions and the retention of childlike innocence. By showing how children mimic, misinterpret, and repurpose adult language, Schulz highlights both the distance between childhood and adulthood and the surprising continuities that unite them, as Harvey suggests: "While the essential element of the strip's humor arises from the contrast between the world of children and that of adults, the charm of *Peanuts* and its introspective greatness lies not in its pointing to the difference between adults and children, but in its emphasizing the similarity" (*ibidem*), even if, quite often, Schulz plays with the confusion between the world of children and that of adults. At times, this confusion takes the form of a playful imitation of children's speech – its hesitations, idiosyncrasies, and inventive logic – while at others, Schulz deliberately ventriloquizes adult concerns through his young characters, transforming their voices into subtle vehicles for social, philosophical, or existential reflection. This oscillation between authentic representations of childhood discourse and the projection of adult sensibilities into a child's idiom creates a productive tension that deepens both the humor and the psychological complexity of the strip. This duality sets the stage for a closer consideration of how the comic strip reflects real patterns of language acquisition and language development. In this way, *Peanuts* becomes not just a reflection of childhood, but a subtle study of how children navigate the boundary between imitation and self-expression.

Given such premises, the present paper adopts a methodological framework that combines elements from multiple theories of language acquisition – behaviorist, constructivist, social-interactionist, and innatist paradigms, thus referring to Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, and Chomsky – while grounding its analysis in selected *Peanuts* strips that exemplify different aspects of linguistic growth. This approach does not seek to privilege one theoretical model over another, nor to reconcile their sometimes contrasting assumptions – such as the tension between behaviorist and innatist views – but rather intends to draw from each what is most useful in interpreting the multifaceted nature of language learning as mirrored in the verbal and cognitive exchanges of

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[2] In *Peanuts*, adult speech is never "heard". In animated versions, adult voice, sounding like a "wah wah", is symbolic of how adult talk becomes background noise to children, emphasizing inaccessibility of adult language: "This sound […] is […] produced by […] a trombone equipped with a plunger mute […] this technique was designed to symbolize the incomprehensible, slightly distant voice of adulthood as perceived by children. […] The 'teacher voice' serves as a fun, lighthearted representation of how kids might hear and disregard uninteresting adult dialogues". See <https://www.brownnoiseradio.com/resources/unlocking-the-mystery%3A-what-instrument-mimics-the-teacher%27s-voice-in-charlie-brown%3F?u> (11/2025).

[3] The present paper does not focus on the sociological and political aspects of Schulz's comics: for further insight on this matter, among other publications, it is possible to refer to Gardner and Gordon (2017); Lee (2019); Ball (2021); Abate (2023).

Schulz's characters. In addition to these classical frameworks, the analysis also takes into account more recent contributions to the study of first language acquisition, including research on the "Language Acquisition Device" and on "usage-based and statistical learning mechanisms" (Saffran, Aslin and Newport 1996; Tomasello 2003; Bybee 2010), as well as the pragmatic dimensions of meaning construction highlighted by Grice's Cooperative Principle and Maxims (1975 and 1989) and Elissa Newport's Theory of Statistical Learning and her "Less is More" Hypothesis (1990). Insights from Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), the developmental perspective offered by Gleason and Ratner (2017), applied linguistic observations from Muhartoyo and Sistofa (2013), and Lakoff and Johnson's theory (1980) on the use of metaphorical language further enrich the interpretative framework.

In this sense, the paper uses *Peanuts* as a creative lens through which the insights of these diverse frameworks can be seen not as mutually exclusive, but as complementary perspectives that together illuminate the complexity of how language develops and is playfully negotiated by children. The strips chosen have been selected for their illustrative value, as they exemplify with particular clarity the linguistic and developmental phenomena discussed; their selection is therefore purposive rather than systematic, guided by theoretical relevance rather than frequency or statistical distribution.

1. Brief Overview on Comics Theory and Methodological Framework

The theoretical framework drawn from developmental and linguistic models requires a very brief and preliminary semiotic grounding concerning how meaning emerges from the formal and visual structures of sequential art. Comics theory can clarify how the interaction of words, images, and spatial organization – the visual cues of the panels – in *Peanuts* contributes to the representation of linguistic development. For this purpose, two complementary theoretical frameworks are applied, namely McCloud's (1994) and Groensteen's (2007).

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994) describes how readers actively construct meaning through the interpretive act he terms "closure", the mental process of connecting isolated visual and textual cues across panels. This mechanism of inference parallels the pragmatic processes involved in language acquisition: just as children infer meaning from partial or context-dependent linguistic input, readers of *Peanuts* fill the gaps between panels and speech balloons to reconstruct tone, intention, and interpersonal nuance. Schulz's dialogue and visual design co-operate to represent the developmental dynamics of children's speech, from imitation and repair to creative self-expression.

Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007) further refines this perspective by introducing a systematic vocabulary for the spatial and relational organization of comics. His notions of "arthrology" – the network of interconnections among panels – and "iconic solidarity" – the cohesive relationship between image and text – illuminate the structural rhythms that underlie Schulz's four-panel compositions. In *Peanuts*, spatial layout functions as a pragmatic and prosodic frame: pauses between panels often correspond to conversational hesitations, reformulations, or moments of misunderstanding, while visual repetition and symmetry reinforce linguistic patterns typical of children's dialogue. Groensteen's spatio-topical framework thus allows for an accurate account of how Schulz's spatial design mediates both the innocence and the sophistication of child language, showing how linguistic meaning is visually and temporally organized within the strip.

Finally, the present paper deliberately pursues a micro-analytic path, privileging the examination of a few paradigmatic strips rather than statistical generalization. Its methodological orientation differs from corpus-linguistic studies such as Arnold, Tilton and Wigard's "Understanding

Peanuts and Schulzian Symmetry" (2023), which apply distant-viewing to map formal regularities across the entirety of Schulz's production. While Arnold, Tilton and Wigard demonstrate that *Peanuts* possesses a measurable internal coherence of composition and theme, the present paper focuses on a small, illustrative selection of strips to examine how language acquisition is depicted. Future research might profitably extend these insights through corpus-linguistic or multimodal methodologies, applying them to the questions addressed here.

2. A Preliminary Consideration: Defining the Developmental Stage of the Characters

After this brief, necessary semiotic acknowledgment, one more preliminary point needs clarification, before delving into specific theories of language acquisition: defining the developmental stage represented by the characters in *Peanuts*. Although the strip spans nearly fifty years, the characters exist within a floating timeline in which their ages remain relatively stable.[4] Charlie Brown is first introduced as a four-year-old in 1950 and later identifies himself as "eight and a half" in a 1979 strip – a figure that appears to become fixed for the remainder of the series. Similarly, Sally Brown is shown entering school around the age of five, but like the other children, she does not continue to age. Most of the core cast is therefore best understood as being between five and nine years old throughout the strip. Only a handful of strips – particularly some of the earliest ones[5] – mention the characters' ages in ways that differ from the fixed, "timeless" ages we later come to associate with them.

This developmental range corresponds to a critical phase in language acquisition, marked by the consolidation of grammatical competence, the emergence of nuanced pragmatic awareness, and an increasingly sustained engagement with adult linguistic models that offer both structure and opportunity for communicative growth. It is an important moment in which children expand their vocabulary and syntactic repertoire and begin to appropriate the social and cultural functions of language. Jean Piaget (1954; Piaget and Inhelder 1958) situates children of this age within the concrete operational stage, where thought becomes more logical and rule-governed, though still bound to tangible experiences. According to B. F. Skinner's behaviorist framework (1957), children at this age are especially responsive to reinforcement mechanisms, mimicking and repeating language that gain social approval. In contrast, Noam Chomsky's nativist model (1957 and 1986) emphasizes the emergence of innate syntactic knowledge, which becomes particularly observable as children begin constructing novel and grammatically structured utterances. Finally, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective (1978) highlights how language functions as a tool for both social participation and internal cognitive development, acquired through interaction with peers and the broader cultural environment. He is best known for defining a "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), that indicates the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. The ZPD applies at all ages, but the nature of tasks and guidance changes as children grow.

3. Peanuts and Language Acquisition Theories

Framing *Peanuts* within this age range thus allows for a theoretically linguistic grounded analysis of the children's speech patterns, providing insight into how language is both

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[4] See <https://www.cbr.com/peanuts-character-ages-info-trivia/> (11/2025).
[5] This could be an example: <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19520919> (11/2025).

acquired and used during a formative stage of development. This renders the strips especially relevant to the domains of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and language acquisition. The comic's blend of childhood perspective with adult language sheds light on how language is acquired, sometimes misused, and repurposed in ways that reveal the hidden complexities of adult communication.

A first consideration concerns language acquisition and pragmatics: children tend to acquire form before function. In their early years, they often reproduce idioms, clichés, or moralistic expressions without a clear understanding of the contexts in which these are used, much as they initially do with routine vocabulary (Gleason and Ratner 2017). This underscores the distinction between linguistic competence – the ability to produce grammatically well-formed sentences – and performance, which involves deploying language appropriately in context. Children frequently echo adult sayings in settings that seem incongruous, producing effects that can appear ironic or even satirical. Such phenomena are consistent with relevance theory and pragmatic inferencing, which posit that meaning is not simply encoded in words but must be inferred through context, tone, and other cues. Schulz's exploitation of such expedients delves into sociolinguistics and language as social behavior, as adult language is revealed to be full of inconsistencies, politeness formulas, and indirectness, while children's misunderstandings highlight how socially constructed and arbitrary some language norms are. At the same time, these dialogues offer valuable insight into children's own communicative logic: how they interpret, question, and repurpose language in ways that reflect their developmental stage, cognitive frameworks, and social positioning. Through the lens of child speech, *Peanuts* reveals a critique of adult communication, and a nuanced portrayal of how children actively negotiate meaning in a world of often arbitrary linguistic conventions.

In the *Peanuts* strip published on January 27, 1977,[6] Linus has climbed up a snowy hill and finds himself stuck, saying he can't get down because it's too slippery. Sally, standing nearby, tells him not to worry, saying, "I'm leaving on the school bus, Linus, but don't worry! I'll send a helicopter for you! Be brave, my sweet babboo!" As she walks away, Linus and Peppermint Patty are left reacting in confusion. Linus says, "Helicopter?" while Peppermint Patty, surprised, repeats, "Sweet Babboo?".[7]

This strip illustrates two perspectives on language development. The puzzled reactions of Linus and Peppermint Patty to Sally's words highlight this tension between imitation without full comprehension and surprising originality in speech. The questions "Helicopter?" and "Sweet Babboo?" are metalinguistic responses: they are not about the situation itself but about the *language* and *meaning* Sally Brown here used. Linus questions "Helicopter?" because it does not fit the real-world context: there is a cognitive mismatch between Sally's fantasy and Linus's concrete reasoning. From Piaget's view (1954), children mimic adult speech and grasp some possibilities of language without yet being able to adapt them meaningfully to their own context (as with the "helicopter"), thus going through pragmatic failure and reproducing comic insight. This phenomenon can also be explained through the lens of pragmatic theory: according to Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975 and 1989), communication depends on speakers observing conversational maxims (of relevance, quantity, quality, and manner).[8] When children, like Sally Brown, violate these maxims – by requesting something unrealistic or contextually inappro-

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[6] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19770127> (11/2025).

[7] <https://peanuts-search.com/> (11/2025).

[8] As for Grice Conversational Maxims, an article discussing the conversational implicature that occurs in *Peanuts* comic strip is Muhartoyo and Sistofa (2013).

priate – the hearer is forced to engage in additional inferential work. This interpretive work reflects the core insight of Relevance Theory: that meaning emerges not solely from linguistic form but through the hearer's active use of contextual information.

Then Peppermint Patty questions the phrase "Sweet Babboo?" because it is an invented term of endearment – reportedly coined by Schulz's wife for her husband – that imitates affective expressions derived from original verbal coinages. This kind of playful invention exemplifies what Chomsky describes as "the creative aspect of language use" (1982): the human ability to generate new and meaningful expressions beyond established linguistic patterns. From Chomsky's view, children demonstrate creativity in language, producing novel expressions such as "Sweet Babboo".

Nearly all of Schulz's strips depict situations that can be read as illustrations of linguistic patterns identifying stages of language development. In the following paragraphs, I will narrow the scope of this inquiry by focusing on examples related to specific "texts": legal discourse, idiomatic expression, and cultural references/quotations (with reference to the Bible).

4. The Use of Legal Expressions

In Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*, the frequent use of formal legal expressions by child characters – such as Sally Brown declaring, "You owe me restitution!"[9] – serves as a rich site for exploring language acquisition and pragmatic development in children.

From a behaviorist perspective, particularly B.F. Skinner's Theory of Verbal Behavior (1957), these utterances can be understood as learned verbal habits shaped by imitation and reinforcement. Children absorb complex adult language – often from media, school, or overheard conversations – and repeat it in new contexts where the literal meaning may be only partially understood. Skinner would argue that the characters' use of legalistic phrases does not indicate a deep grasp of jurisprudence, but rather a conditioned linguistic response reinforced by social reactions such as attention, laughter, or perceived authority. Sally, for instance, does not understand the legal meaning of "restitution", but she knows it is a serious-sounding term used to demand something, and this tone gets attention. From a pragmatic perspective, these expressions illustrate early attempts at using language as a tool for achieving social goals. According to more updated research, it is also possible to say that Sally's exaggerated appeal to "restitution" humorously illustrates how children acquire formal vocabulary through statistical sensitivity to linguistic input (Saffran, Aslin and Newport 1996; Thiessen and Erickson 2015). Children are data-driven learners, building probabilistic maps of words and meanings long before they can consciously explain them. Sally's "restitution" is a learned token in her linguistic inventory; she deploys it confidently, as though invoking adult authority, without full semantic nuance. The result is funny but also cognitively realistic. Although her utterance is lexically precise, it is pragmatically misaligned, echoing research showing that probabilistic learning of lexical form often precedes mastery of sociolinguistic context (Bybee 2010; Romberg and Saffran 2010).

A further example can be found in the strip published on January 12, 1972,[10] where Peppermint Patty uses a register borrowed from court rooms language with the principal of her school: she applies legal language to a familiar (yet formal) context and appropriates it, as she considers this register as apparently suitable for the situation. In this *Peanuts* strip, Peppermint

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[9] The strip in which Sally pronounces these words in dated November 03, 1962: <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19621103> (11/2025).

[10] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19720112> (11/2025).

Patty is in the principal's office, admitting that she deliberately broke the school dress code. She explains that she expected to be sent there and was prepared – then proudly reveals that she brought her "attorney," who turns out to be Snoopy.

From a cognitive developmental perspective, particularly that of Jean Piaget, the use of legalistic language by the children in *Peanuts* reflects their stage-specific understanding of the world and of language. According to Piaget, children in the concrete operational stage (typically ages 7-11) begin to grasp rules, fairness, and cause-effect relationships, but their reasoning remains closely tied to tangible experiences. Sally's demand for "restitution" demonstrates her awareness of justice and rights, yet she interprets these concepts in an overly literal and egocentric manner. She treats complex legal principles as if they apply to her immediate frustrations, thus revealing her limited capacity for abstract reasoning. Similarly, Peppermint Patty's declaration to her principal that she is "accompanied by her attorney" when confronted with accusations of misbehavior illustrates the same developmental tendency: she mimics the formalities of the legal system without fully understanding their procedural or abstract implications, using the phrase less as a genuine legal defense and more as a concrete, playful extension of her sense of fairness and self-protection.

In contrast, Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes how children acquire language and concepts through interaction with more knowledgeable others. From this view, the children's legal expressions are signs of linguistic scaffolding:[11] they borrow and internalize phrases from adult discourse, experimenting with their use in peer interactions. Vygotsky would argue that such language, though not always conceptually mastered, enables children to participate in social negotiations and gradually shape their cognitive frameworks. In both theories, the humorous misuse of legal language in *Peanuts* reveals how children actively test and internalize the functions of language in real-world social settings.

A further interesting strip in which characters are depicted like children learning some basic law information taken from a book was published on November 09, 1982.[12] Here, Linus is reading from a book and explains, "A misdemeanor is a minor offense". Then, he adds, "Like maybe jaywalking", giving an example. Linus continues, "A felony is a more serious crime". Snoopy, sitting and listening the whole time, thinks to himself, "Like not feeding the dog!".

Here the strip clearly shows what source of legal language Linus reads from: it is a book in which the difference between felony and misdemeanor is explained. This strip shows how the children's rudimentary legal language often comes from schoolwork or textbooks rather than lived legal experience or from adults talking about legal practices. Linus is clearly reading definitions aloud, lifted directly from a civics or social studies assignment. From a cognitive developmental perspective, this leads to two distinct conclusions: first, as said, it makes explicit the source of legal terms (teachers, books, TV, school materials). Second, it shows the usual reinterpretation through concrete reasoning, where Linus immediately grounds the abstract concept of "misdemeanor" in a concrete, relatable example – jaywalking –, while Snoopy (considered here as a child) takes this even further by humorously reapplying the category of "felony" to his own concern: not being fed. This reflects Piaget's idea of concrete operational thought (1954), where children can categorize and apply rules but remain tied to immediate, egocentric concerns.

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[11] In Vygotskian theory (1978), "scaffolding" refers to the temporary support provided by a more knowledgeable other (such as a teacher, parent, or peer) to help a learner accomplish a task that they could not complete independently but can achieve within their "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) (the gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance). The support is gradually withdrawn as the learner gains competence, enabling independent performance.

[12] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19821109> (11/2025).

To conclude with the legal jargon, one more strip, published on May 19, 1980,[13] well illustrates what Harvey (2022) states when discussing the boundaries between adult and children language. Here, Lucy is criticizing Snoopy, who appears dressed like a lawyer with a bow tie and briefcase. She sarcastically mocks him, asking if he thinks those accessories make him Oliver Wendell Holmes, a famous U.S. Supreme Court Justice. She continues to insult his legal knowledge, claiming he would not even recognize an objection from a jury box. As she keeps ranting, she tells him to write all of that down on his "latex gummed canary yellow, eight and a half by fourteen legal pad", poking fun at lawyer clichés. In the final panel, Snoopy, clearly hurt but keeping his dignity, sits silently and thinks, "How to hurt an attorney's feelings", capturing both the humor and the sting of Lucy's words.

The strip in which Lucy confronts Snoopy-as-lawyer illustrates both the potential and the limitations of *Peanuts* as a source for considering children's language acquisition. On one hand, Lucy's speech demonstrates advanced linguistic competence through complex syntactic structures and highly specific noun phrases, such as her elaborate description of a legal pad. This capacity to manipulate and parody adult registers reflects the way children absorb fragments of adult discourse and redeploy them in creative, often playful ways. The humor, as Harvey (2022) has argued, arises not from the differences between adult and child voices but from their unexpected similarities, here embodied in Lucy's near-perfect appropriation of legal rhetoric. On the other hand, the cultural reference to Oliver Wendell Holmes and the intricate detail of legal terminology place the strip beyond the realistic linguistic and cognitive reach of a child. From a developmental perspective, this dialogue is less a faithful representation of child speech than an instance of adult ventriloquism through child characters. This underscores a broader tension in Schulz's work: while *Peanuts* can illuminate how children experiment with language, it often does so by exaggerating their capacities, thus blurring the line between authentic developmental processes and stylized adult projection.

5. Quotes from the Bible

Another intriguing instance of adult language reshaped by children can be found in the characters' use of expressions drawn from the Church. In a strip dated October 23, 1973,[14] Charlie Brown quotes Matthew 5:45 where Jesus says that God "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust". The verse suggests a kind of divine impartiality: everyone, good or bad, experiences both blessings and hardships. Charlie Brown and Linus are walking under the rain, and Charlie Brown says: "The rain falls on the just and the unjust"; after a pause Linus, a frequent moral and religious voice in the strip, hears this and responds not with a theological reflection, but with a dry, pragmatic observation: "That's a good system". In the exchange between Charlie Brown and Linus, meaning is not confined to the dialogue itself but emerges in the silent interval between panels, where the reader reconstructs Linus's shift from theological to pragmatic reasoning. McCloud's concept of "closure" (1994) – the reader's mental act of inferring what happens between panels – illuminates how Schulz uses the temporal and visual gaps of the comic form to dramatize processes of interpretation and misunderstanding. These interpanel pauses function as conversational timing devices, akin to the pauses and repair sequences observed in children's speech development, where reinterpreta-

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[13] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19800519> (11/2025).
[14] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19731023> (11/2025).

tion and reformulation mark growing linguistic competence. Schulz thus exploits the "gutter" not merely as a structural necessity but as a semiotic space in which language learning itself becomes visible: the reader witnesses, in miniature, the cognitive leap from misinterpretation to new understanding – a process central to both communication and development.

This exchange between Charlie Brown and Linus is a brilliant example of how children in *Peanuts* absorb and reframe adult language, especially complex moral or philosophical ideas, using childlike logic. Not only does Linus produce a novel and grammatically correct sentence that shows his internal grasp of syntax and irony and does not just repeat an adult response; he constructs a new meaning. This aligns with Chomsky's Theory of Innate Language Competence (1957). Linus has internalized enough about English grammar to produce an evaluative statement. The humor arises from the contrast between a profound religious text and a child's utilitarian, literal reaction. Furthermore, Linus, despite being highly articulate, still operates within the Piagetian concrete operational stage of thought. He understands fairness and systems but might not fully grasp abstract moral theology. His comment reflects a logical but simplistic evaluation as he treats divine impartiality like an efficiency model. Piaget would say that this is an example of how language can outpace conceptual maturity. Linus speaks fluently but applies reasoning rooted in childhood logic structures. This exchange captures the heart of *Peanuts'* linguistic world: language borrowed from adults, filtered through a child's logic, and reshaped into something unintentionally profound.

Echoing lines from the Gospels and the Bible, often with a mixture of innocence and seriousness, opens up also to other perspectives of language development. This kind of repetition reveals how children acquire and internalize complex linguistic forms through formulaic language and cultural transmission. Biblical verses, marked by their rhythm, parallelism, and memorable phrasing, act as prefabricated chunks of language that children can reproduce even before they fully understand their theological or historical implications. This mirrors early stages of acquisition, where learners frequently rely on set expressions as building blocks for later creative use.

From Bruner's constructivist perspective, such quotations illustrate how children engage with cultural tools that help them enter into shared systems of meaning. Bruner (1986) emphasizes that language learning is not just the acquisition of grammar, but also of "narrative modes of thought" and culturally valued ways of speaking. By repeating scriptural passages, children in *Peanuts* take part in a collective narrative tradition, using these authoritative forms of speech to position themselves within a community and to make sense of their experiences. Bruner would view this as an example of how children are scaffolded into complex discourse practices by drawing on culturally rich input. Moreover, from Krashen's Input Hypothesis,[15] the reproduction of biblical language can be seen as a response to high-quality input that is slightly beyond a child's everyday linguistic competence. Children encountering biblical passages are exposed to linguistic input that is rich and formal. Even in their native language, this type of input can work similarly to "i+1": it provides complex, structured language that is memorable and partly understandable, allowing children to repeat it and gradually incorporate its forms into their repertoire. In this sense, biblical verses in the strip act almost like "semi-foreign" input in the child's first language. Scriptural language, while elevated, is often familiar due to its presence in church, school, or family life. Krashen (1982) argues that learners acquire language when they are exposed to comprehensible input that stretches their abilities without overwhelming them.

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[15] Krashen's central idea of comprehensible input (1982) is applied to second language acquisition, yet it can still be illuminating in *Peanuts*.

In this sense, biblical passages represent challenging but memorable input, that children may first repeat *verbatim* and later adapt creatively in new contexts, as some *Peanuts* characters do.

Together, these perspectives show that when Schulz's child characters reproduce biblical lines, they reflect broader processes of language development: moving from repetition to creative reapplication, from formulaic chunks to personalized expression, and from external cultural input to internalized linguistic competence.

Yet, as with the legal references discussed earlier, there are moments in *Peanuts* where the children's discourse appears to exceed what might plausibly fall within the linguistic and cultural grasp of a nine-year-old. The difference with the biblical quotes, however, lies in the accessibility of the domains being represented. Whereas the reference seen above to Oliver Wendell Holmes or legal stationery presupposes knowledge of professional practices far removed from children's everyday lives, scriptural quotations may be more within their experiential reach. Church attendance, Sunday school, or exposure to family prayer make biblical language part of a child's regular environment, thereby providing a more plausible context for their appropriation of such discourse. As said, from Bruner's perspective (1986), this suggests that scriptural language can operate as a cultural tool more readily available to children, scaffolding them into collective meaning-making practices even if they cannot fully grasp the theological implications. Similarly, from Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), biblical passages function as high-quality input that remains comprehensible because of contextual familiarity, even if the syntax and vocabulary stretch the child's competence.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Schulz's repeated use of the biblical saying "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb", which appears in two separate strips, that appeared on February 19, 1982 and February 19, 1993.[16] While the phrase clearly belongs to a culturally elevated register, its recurrence in different narrative contexts offers insight into how children might engage with such language not only as passive recipients but also as active participants in its performance.

In the first strip, Linus cites the biblical saying as a form of ritualized comfort during a snowstorm, presenting it as a culturally sanctioned response to adversity. Yet the visual reality – Snoopy nearly buried in snow – undermines the reassurance the phrase is meant to provide. Snoopy's wry response, "Those lambs are in trouble", foregrounds a disconnect between linguistic form and experiential truth. Here, the child's reproduction of religious language appears as an attempt to access an adult register of meaning, but one that collapses under the weight of its own inapplicability.

The second strip offers a variation on this dynamic. Spike, isolated in the desert, also recites the phrase but then immediately follows it with the metalinguistic comment, "Whatever that means". His remark signals an awareness of the phrase as a culturally valued expression, but simultaneously indexes a lack of semantic resolution. Spike's uncertainty encapsulates a key sociolinguistic point: children (and even child-like characters) often appropriate prestigious or institutional discourses as part of their linguistic socialization, but without full access to the interpretive frameworks adults attach to those discourses (as said, in this case a form of ritualized comfort during adversities). Schulz presents this as both comic and authentic: children inhabit the language of tradition, yet their use of it reveals the gaps between rote repetition and meaningful comprehension.

One could argue that the rhetorical sophistication and theological implications embed-

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[16] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19820219> and <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19930219> (11/2025).

ded in biblical passages are not fully available to children, who may reproduce them more as ritualized forms of speech than as expressions of autonomous understanding. Again, this tension underscores how Schulz oscillates between depicting children's authentic engagement with familiar cultural registers and attributing to them adult-like mastery of discourses whose depth of meaning likely lies beyond their developmental stage. However, while the reproduction of legal jargon in *Peanuts* highlights the comic's tendency toward adult ventriloquism, the echoing of biblical language illustrates a more plausible pathway for children's participation in elevated discourse.

6. Idiomatic Expressions and Symbolic Language

From legal jargon to biblical references, language often relies on symbolic and idiomatic expressions to convey meanings that go beyond the literal. These forms of speech act as cultural shortcuts, packing emotional and social significance into familiar phrases. Idioms reveal how individuals internalize broader cultural norms – often unconsciously.

A telling example is Charlie Brown's catchphrase "Good grief!", that serves as an idiomatic placeholder for frustration, signaling a child's internalization of adult emotional language. "Good grief" is an idiomatic expression, an exclamation of frustration, disbelief, or exasperation. It is a mild euphemism, a softened form of "Good God!" or "For God's sake", sanitized for polite or child-friendly use. While semantically contradictory, it functions pragmatically and socially as a coping tool. This expression, famously and frequently used by Charlie Brown, can be analyzed in a very similar way to the Bible quote exchange. Though it is short and colloquial, "Good grief" is linguistically and psychologically rich, especially when viewed through the lens of child language acquisition. The use of "Good Grief" by Charlie Brown reflects Skinner's theory that language is not an innate ability (as Chomsky believed), but a learned behavior acquired through operant conditioning. In Skinner's view, children learn to speak by imitating sounds and words they hear around them, and by being reinforced (rewarded or punished) for their verbal behavior. Charlie Brown likely learned the phrase from adults – parents, teachers, or characters in media who use such mild expletives. He repeats it constantly as a conditioned response to stress or confusion, a kind of verbal reflex. In this view, "Good grief" is a learned behavior, not a meaningful expression. Over time, using the phrase became reinforced socially: perhaps it earned laughs, sympathy, or served to release tension. It helped Charlie self-soothe, as a form of internal reinforcement (the relief he feels when saying it).

Moreover, children's limited cognitive abilities – far from being a disadvantage – can actually facilitate language acquisition by helping them focus on simpler, more learnable patterns: "Good Grief" can be an example of such learnable pattern. From this perspective, Elissa Newport's Theory of Statistical Learning and "Less is More" Hypothesis (1990)[17] helps explain how a child like Charlie Brown can accurately and appropriately use adult-like expressions without necessarily understanding all of their underlying components. His frequent and consistent exposure to adult speech patterns gives him statistical input – enough to internalize when and how certain expressions are used, even if he doesn't fully grasp their logic. Possibly, "Good Grief" represents an expression Charlie Brown has been exposed to quite frequently.

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[17] According to Newport's Theory of Statistical Learning and "Less is More" Hypothesis (1990), children's limited cognitive capacities (such as working memory or attention span) actually facilitate language learning, because they force children to focus on simpler patterns in language input. Over time, as their cognitive abilities grow, children can begin to process and produce more complex structures.

On the other hand, exploiting here a contrasting theory, we can argue that Charlie Brown's repeated use of "Good grief" is not simply mimicry, but it is grammatically and contextually appropriate, showing his command of idiomatic expression. Chomsky would point out that Charlie is not just echoing words, he is choosing them based on his internalized knowledge of when exclamations are used. His language use demonstrates competence, even if the phrase is semantically strange. It shows that he has internalized the idiom as a functional linguistic unit. Like quoting scripture or using legalisms, the phrase becomes a window into how children process, parody, and perpetuate adult ways of speaking.

A further interesting aspect to be explored is related to children's ability to internalize and repurpose metaphorical language, rendering it more personal and adapting it to their own context. This also shows how children actually grasp the profound meaning of language and its possibilities, with the use of figures of speech or the capacity to recognize general and/or specific cultural references. The following strips exemplify such instances.

In the first strip, published on February 29, 1988,[18] Marcie reproduces a metaphorical language and Peppermint Patty adapts it to her school condition.

When Marcie introduces a figurative framework by describing life as having "sunshine and rain" and "peaks and valleys", Peppermint Patty reinterprets it to reflect her disappointment with her grades, remarking that "it's raining tonight in my valley". This shows not only her grasp of figurative meaning but also her metalinguistic and pragmatic awareness, as she applies an abstract metaphorical structure to a specific personal context. From a language acquisition perspective, this exchange illustrates Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), where Marcie's input serves as a scaffold within Patty's zone of proximal development, enabling her to build meaning through social interaction. Moreover, Peppermint Patty's response reflects the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980),[19] demonstrating how learners map concrete experiences (weather, landscapes) onto abstract ones (failure, frustration). According to this framework, much of human thought and language is structured by metaphor, where we understand abstract or intangible concepts in terms of more concrete and embodied experiences. Peppermint Patty is actively manipulating the metaphorical frame to produce a novel, contextually appropriate utterance. This shows Peppermint Patty recognizes that the metaphor is not literal but transferable – it can be restructured to express different kinds of hardship. From the perspective of language acquisition, this demonstrates a high degree of metalinguistic awareness.

In the second strip, released on August 01, 1978,[20] Linus creates a metaphor using the jargon of sports, and adapting it to the habitual "life competition" between adults (parents) and children. Charlie Brown and Linus are sitting together, and Charlie Brown notes that kids and parents are always arguing about something. Linus responds by saying that kids actually have the advantage. When Charlie Brown looks surprised, Linus explains that kids can wear parents down over time. He finishes with a punchline using a sports metaphor, saying, "Kids have better bench strength", suggesting that, like a sports team with more backup players, kids can outlast their parents in arguments through sheer persistence.

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[18] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19880229> (11/2025).

[19] Conceptual Metaphor Theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), argues that metaphor is not just a feature of language but a fundamental part of human thought. According to the theory, we understand abstract concepts (like time, emotion, or ideas) through more concrete, physical experiences. These metaphorical mappings are systematic and often unconscious.

[20] <https://peanuts-search.com/I/19780801> (11/2025).

Linus's "bench strength" violates the maxim of relevance[21] for a normal family-argument discussion. Charlie Brown's silent look is a conversational repair, he is processing the mismatch between the sports metaphor and the domestic context, but instead of asking for clarification, he responds with a nonverbal cue of mild confusion or surprise. According to Piaget's Cognitive Perspective, Linus is engaging in abstract and analogical thinking, mapping concepts from one domain (sports teams) onto another (parent-child disputes), creating a playful but unexpected mental image. Charlie Brown, momentarily thrown off by the leap in context, appears to still be in a more literal interpretive frame for the conversation and thus pauses to reconcile the unexpected analogy.

At the same time, Linus's appropriation of the idiom "bench strength" exemplifies what Tomasello (2003) and Bybee (2010) describe as "usage-based generalization": the ability to abstract a construction from repeated usage and creatively redeploy it in new contexts. Linus does not invent a new idiom, he recombines one he has likely heard in adult talk, applying it metaphorically to family dynamics. Schulz captures the constructivist nature of child speech – Linus's phrasing is not random imitation but a creative overextension of a learned pattern. In modern linguistic terms, this exemplifies how "chunks" of adult speech become productive linguistic templates once a child recognizes their broader pragmatic potential.

These two examples show that *Peanuts* characters are not just passive imitators but consciously reflect on language. This means that, if most of the times Schulz shows children trying to use adult tools of logic before they are cognitively ready, on other occasions the author shows how children can manipulate language and its nuances exploiting idiomatic expressions, figures of speech and cultural references for their own linguistic and communicative purposes.

Conclusions: Language Acquisition Theories and the Peanuts

From the examples reported insofar it is possible to conclude that *Peanuts* well engage with the different theories on language acquisition, and that often it plays with such theories creating paradoxical and comic/ironic situations in which the humour is due exactly to this contrast between adult language and children's appropriation of linguistic tools.

In *Peanuts*, we see clear signs of B.F. Skinner's behaviorist approach (1957) to language depending on imitation, reinforcement, and repetition. The children often repeat adult phrases they have overheard, sometimes accurately, but often without fully understanding them. This repetition is not random; it reflects learned behavior from their surroundings. The phrases have been reinforced either because they provoke a response or are associated with authority figures (teachers, parents, media). Children echo language as behavior, not necessarily as understanding. The humor in *Peanuts* arises partly from seeing this mismatch between form (language) and function (meaning). However, Skinner's theory faces limits: *Peanuts* children do not just mimic, they sometimes generate new sentences and abstract ideas.

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[21] The Maxim of Relevance, proposed by Grice (1975 and 1989) as part of his theory of conversational implicature, states that speakers should contribute information that is relevant to the ongoing conversation. In other words, what one says should directly relate to the topic at hand. Listeners assume that this principle is being followed, which allows them to infer additional meaning from what is said – or what is left unsaid. When relevance is deliberately flouted, it can create irony, humor, or indirect communication, such as when a speaker changes the subject to avoid answering a question.

Alongside Skinner's insights, Chomsky's Theory of Generative Grammar (1957) helps explain the children's ability to move beyond repetition and produce original, complex utterances. In *Peanuts*, many of the characters – especially Linus, Charlie Brown, and sometimes Peppermint Patty – show signs of this creative grammatical ability. They produce complex, syntactically sound sentences that are highly unlikely to have been mimicked word-for-word. Linus often speaks in compound and complex sentences, a hallmark of Chomsky's Generative Grammar. Chomsky's Theory explains how *Peanuts* children can generate new meanings from known structures, beyond rote repetition. Their errors tend to be developmental, not imitative. These strips suggest that children, like Linus and Charlie Brown, possess an internalized system of rules allowing them to produce rich, nuanced language: language learning is biologically hardwired and not simply conditioned behavior.

The *Peanuts* strips often provide ground for a contrasting and complementary theory: that language development is fundamentally social. Schulz's strips depict children in dialogue where one character models a higher linguistic or cognitive level, while the other mimics or struggles to catch up. These interactions reflect the social construction of knowledge. Linus and Charlie Brown often have conversations where Linus quotes the Bible or muses on philosophical ideas. Charlie Brown listens, asks questions, or responds with confusion. This is a perfect example of Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978), where Charlie is exposed to new concepts through a peer who functions, in Vygotsky's terms, as the "more knowledgeable other". Vygotsky would argue that the language in *Peanuts* is not "too advanced" for children, but that it reflects the way children grow into language through mimicry, dialogue, and role-play. The comic strips become microcosms of scaffolded social learning.

Beyond these classical frameworks, Schulz's humor also resonates with more recent perspectives in language acquisition. Usage-based and statistical learning models (Tomasello 2003; Bybee 2010; Saffran, Aslin and Newport 1996) help explain how children extract and recombine frequent linguistic patterns from their environment – much as Schulz's characters do when they recycle adult idioms with comic creativity. Pragmatic theories such as Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) illuminate how irony, miscommunication, and conversational implicature shape the humor of their exchanges, while Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) and contemporary studies of social interaction (Gleason and Ratner 2017; Muhartoyo and Sistofa 2013) underscore the role of meaningful input and context in language development. Bruner's idea of a Language Acquisition Support System (1986) similarly emphasizes how linguistic growth depends on structured social interaction and narrative scaffolding. Although some of these approaches appear theoretically opposed, this study considers them complementary, each highlighting distinct yet compatible dimensions of how language is acquired, processed, and performed.

To conclude, through the lens of Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, and Chomsky – enriched by more contemporary theories of linguistic and pragmatic development – in *Peanuts* we see children navigating between imitation, creativity, and social role-playing. The strips provide a playful but poignant mirror of how language is not only acquired, but also constantly reshaped and socially constructed. By presenting a world where kids talk like adults but think like children, Schulz allows us to observe language acquisition in motion, with all its missteps, mimicry, creativity, and charm. It makes us laugh and smile. Yet, it offers more than comedy: it represents a semiotic playground and offers us a mirror to children's language acquisition.

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