



*Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.*

## What Would Chomsky Say?

A game played at a baby shower I recently attended required each guest to change a baby doll's diaper while watching football on television. I slipped out of the living room. Sure I can change a diaper with my eyes closed. But watch football? No thank you! The game had been cleverly created to address a challenge soon to be faced by the mom-to-be, an avid football fan, and, I might add, a damn good softball player. In short, she's an all-round jock.

Being a jock did not impede her ability to ooh and ahh over the baby gifts she received. I, however, have great trouble getting these nonsense syllables right. When it came time to open gifts, the few men at the party wandered into other rooms. But I stayed with my sisters, determined to master oohing and aahing: crib sheets with little dinosaurs, "ooh"; onesies, "aah"; matching mobile and lamp, "ooh...aah."

I was a complete failure. My timing was off, and my inflection was flat. One woman said I sounded like I was having a bowel movement. It was all very disheartening, and I began to wonder if men are incapable of generating the vocal gymnastics needed to raise sound children, especially from infancy.

My former infant, now eleven years old, appears to be doing well – she's as moody and miserable as any other tween I know, but maybe there's some flaw lurking that's yet to surface. Maybe she'll sit "oohless" while a friend opens gifts. "She must have been raised by fathers," will be the explanation whispered across the room.

My inability to accurately utter nonsense syllables concerned me when Mona was an infant. I couldn't bring myself to use baby talk. No matter how hard I tried, saying coo, gaga or tum-tum embarrassed me. My lips would quiver each time they struggled to form the required shapes. In one of the many books I read about parenting while Mona was an infant – it was much easier to read about parenting than actually do it – I came across something called motherese: simply put, it's the higher, gentler vocalizations mothers use with infants. In other words, baby talk. I was convinced that if I didn't master this, Mona would never speak. At best, she would utter only guttural groans, like a child who had been reared by wolves – male wolves, at that.

My inability to ooh and aah or coo and gaga, is a symptom of a much more insidious psycholinguistic disorder. There are certain foods I loath to order in diners and chain restaurants that use gimmicky and somewhat suggestive names for their specials.

Recently, instead of ordering an Italian Stallion in a local deli, I asked for the Italian sandwich and listed all of the ingredients. The short-order cook said, "Oh, you want the Italian Stallion." To which I could barely mumble, "Yes." And when he asked, "Do you want anything on your stallion?" I had all I could do to keep from blushing. I haven't dined in a Pizza Hut for years, ever since they started calling one of their specials Thick and Chewy. And running my fingernails on a blackboard would be less stressful than ordering a Big Whopper in Burger King.

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Years ago, in group therapy – which in my case yielded little success – each patient was assigned an animal to imitate by the person sitting next to them. I was to be a moose. Not very flattering, but I feared that I'd appear obsessively self-conscious if I asked for another animal. Instead, I spent most of the session fretting over why I reminded someone of a moose. The therapeutic task was to make sounds like the animal. The lion roared and the horse neighed and the chicken clucked. Then it was my turn. I remained silent. My fellow animals-in-therapy tried to be supportive, but the more they attempted to encourage me, the more embarrassed I became. One said, "You can do it. Just bugle like a moose." It was nice to at least have a term to call what I had no intention of doing. I dismissed the trauma by telling myself that bugling would not improve my mental health, unless, of course, I desired to mate with a moose.

With such a history of vocal challenges, it's little wonder that I can't emote over gifts at baby showers or use baby talk. But, at my friend's shower, I thought that I'd give it one last try. Alas, it was disaster!

Fortunately – depending on how one looks at it – Mona never seems to be at a loss for words. Actually, she turned out to be quite precocious regarding early language development, no thanks to her father talking to her from the beginning with complete words and in complete sentences. Another example of just how resilient some children are.