Experimental studies of language learning in children

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University of Liverpool

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Abstract

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Acquiring a language involves forming some kind of mental grammar, that is, some abstract representations which allow the user to produce and understand novel utterances. One hypothesis is that, at least in part, this acquisition relies on distributional statistical learning – i.e. forming generalizations on the basis of recurring patterns in the input. A body of research has found support for this process using artificial language learning i.e. experiments where learners are exposed to novel languages with particular properties, and are then tested for learning and generalization. Largely for practical reasons, these experiments are primarily conducted with adult learners, although the authors make inferences from these data as to the processes involved in child language acquisition. In contrast, there has been relatively little experimental work directly exploring children's ability to use distributional statistics when learning novel languages. I will present data from three different experiments exploring children's (5-7 years) learning of novel linguistic structures under experimental conditions. The results demonstrate that, like adults, children can learn novel constructions under experimental conditions, and that input structure influences extent of generalization. However children's learning may be more constrained than that of adults. Further, I show that similar methodology can be used to explore wider questions about children's language learning, including questions from the sociolinguistic literature and questions about children's abilities to learn second languages in the primary classroom.

Directions: Rendall Building no 432 on the University campus map.

https://www.liv.ac.uk/files/docs/maps/liverpool-university-campus-map.pdf

Further information

For further information about this seminar, please contact michaeline.k.glover@manchester.ac.uk or about LuCiD, please contact helen.allwood@manchester.ac.uk