More learnable than thou?
Empirically testing linguistic knowledge representations
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Institute for Mathematical Behavioral Sciences Colloquium Series
November 21, 2013

Logic and Philosophy of Science Colloquium Series
November 22, 2013

One (often implicit) motivation for a linguistic knowledge representation comes from an argument from acquisition, with the idea that language acquisition is straightforward if children’s hypothesis space is defined by the correct knowledge representation. Acquisition then becomes the process of selecting the correct language-specific grammar from that hypothesis space, based on the language input encountered. I discuss a quantitative metric based on an argument from acquisition for comparing knowledge representations and the grammars they define. This metric involves assessing grammar learnability from realistic input data, and I apply this metric to three prominent knowledge representations in the domain of metrical phonology that each propose a grammar for English, a notoriously tricky language containing many irregularities. I discover that learnability issues arise for the English grammars in all three representations, and discuss aspects of the proposed English grammars that may be hurting learnability as well as ways a child may still be able to learn the proposed English grammars from English input.