Psych 215: Language Sciences (Language Acquisition)

Lecture 16
Poverty of the Stimulus III

Reminder: Poverty of the Stimulus

Language

Can be thought of as the set of legal items in the language (sentences, strings, etc.). The child’s job: figure out the rules that generate that legal set and don’t generate illegal items.

Legal Items

Hoggle is an ornery dwarf

Can the girl who can summon the Goblin King solve the Labyrinth?

Illegal Items

Fairies bite adventurers

Can the girl who can summon the Goblin King solve the Labyrinth?

Addendum (interpretation): Or children converge on the correct hypothesis much earlier than expected (Legate & Yang 2002).

Conclusion:

Children possess innate knowledge ruling out the incorrect hypothesis from the hypothesis space considered.

Addendum (interpretation): The initial hypothesis space does not include all hypotheses. Specifically, the incorrect ones of a particular kind are not in the child’s hypothesis space.

Reminder: Poverty of the Stimulus

The Logic of Poverty of the Stimulus (The Logical Problem of Language Acquisition)

1) Suppose there is some data.

2) Suppose there is an incorrect hypothesis compatible with the data.

3) Suppose children behave as if they never entertain the incorrect hypothesis.

Addendum (interpretation): Or children converge on the correct hypothesis much earlier than expected (Legate & Yang 2002).

Conclusion:

Children possess innate knowledge ruling out the incorrect hypothesis from the hypothesis space considered.

Addendum (interpretation): The initial hypothesis space does not include all hypotheses. Specifically, the incorrect ones of a particular kind are not in the child’s hypothesis space.

Reminder: Poverty of the Stimulus

The argument for having innate biases to guide language acquisition

Idea: The data available to the child are compatible with a number of generalizations. However, children only seem to pick the right ones. Therefore, they must have some other constraints guiding their language learning.

The innate part: The guiding information must be available prior to learning.
Reminder: LPLA

Induction Problem: Logical Problem of Language Acquisition (Standard Theory)

Children don’t usually gain access to all the data we just saw by the time they have the correct generalization (move main clause auxiliary). They learn from a subset of the legal items in the language. And still they seem to converge on the right generalizations...without trying out many (or all) of the wrong ones.

Pullum & Scholz (2002)

“...linguistic nativism is the view...that human infants have at least some linguistically specific innate knowledge”

“...issue is whether a full description of that predisposition incorporates anything that entails specific contingent facts about natural languages”

[poverty of the stimulus]

“...argument...turns on the claim that during the language acquisition process, children often come to know things about the language they are acquiring despite not having access to the crucial evidence that shows these things to be true of the language.”


“Instead of clarifying the reasoning, each successive writer on this topic shakes together an idiosyncratic cocktail of claims about children’s learning of language, and concludes nativism is thereby supported. Most of the frequently encountered claims are about children’s observable accomplishments or aspects of the child’s environment.”


Children’s observable accomplishments

Speed: Children learn so fast.
Reliability: Children always succeed.
Productivity: Children learn a system.
Selectivity: Children pick the correct option from a bunch of incorrect (and “seductive”) alternatives.
Underdetermination: Children arrive at systems of knowledge underdetermined by the data.
Convergence: Children end up with the right system.
Universality: The system acquired has a lot of properties in common with other language systems of the world.

Children’s observable accomplishments

**Speed:** Children learn so fast.
**Reliability:** Children always succeed.
**Productivity:** Children learn a system.
**Selectivity:** Children pick the correct option from a bunch of incorrect (and “seductive”) alternatives.
**Underdetermination:** Children arrive at systems of knowledge underdetermined by the data.
**Convergence:** Children end up with the right system.
**Universality:** The system acquired has a lot of properties in common with other language systems of the world.

**Relevant Interpretation:**
- Faster than expected, given available data.
- Seductive because also compatible with data.
- Alternative hypotheses also compatible with data.


Aspects of Child’s Environment

**Ingratitude:** No explicit payoff for correct language usage.
**Finiteness:** Children don’t get infinite data to learn from.
**Idiosyncracy:** The subset of data children encounter varies from child to child.
**Incompleteness:** Children don’t hear everything in the language.
**Positivity:** No explicit instruction of what isn’t in the language.
**Degeneracy:** Input to children has noise.

Aspects of Child’s Environment

Finiteness: Children don’t get infinite data to learn from.
  Relevant Interpretation: Make generalization from incomplete data set.

Idiosyncrasy: The subset of data children encounter varies from child to child.
  Relevant Interpretation: Make generalization from incomplete data set.

Incompleteness: Children don’t hear everything in the language.
  Relevant Interpretation: Make generalization from incomplete data set.

Positivity: No explicit instruction of what isn’t in the language.
  Relevant Interpretation: Make generalization from incomplete data set.

Pullum & Scholz (2002): The Version Chosen To Attack

*“People attain knowledge of the structure of their language for which no evidence is available in the data to which they were exposed as children.”* - Hornstein & Lightfoot (1981)

*“We replace total lack of evidence by lack of evidence that is adequate to the task... would not emerge in conversational data near often enough to guarantee that any particular child would ever encounter it.”* - Pullum & Scholz

“…'the APS’ to stand for ‘the Argument Selected by Pullum & Scholz’”

Pullum & Scholz (2002): How to Support APS

Step 1: Describe in detail what is known.

Step 2a: Identify the crucial data that would lead a data-driven learner to that knowledge.

Step 2b: Given reason to believe that’s the crucial data.

Step 3: Show learners don’t have access to that crucial data.

Step 4: Show that learners nonetheless acquire the right knowledge.

Pullum & Scholz (2002): How to Support APS

Step 1: Describe in detail what is known.

Step 2a: Identify the crucial data that would lead a data-driven learner to that knowledge.

Step 2b: Given reason to believe that’s the crucial data.

Step 3: Show learners don’t have access to that crucial data.
  One way: Look for really rare data types. These are likely to be close enough to absent.

Step 4: Show that learners nonetheless acquire the right knowledge.
Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 1: Plurals in noun-noun compounds

3-6 yr old's behavior:
- Irregular plural pattern (plural marker on first noun okay)
  - 1 tooth-eater or 1 teeth-eater
  - 1 mouse-eater or 1 mice-eater

- Regular plural pattern (plural marker on first noun not okay)
  - 1 toy-eater (but not 1 toys-eater)
  - 1 rat-eater (but not 1 rats-eater)

Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 1: Plurals in noun-noun compounds

Knowledge of incomplete paradigm:
- tooth-eater
tooth-eater
toy-eater
"toys-eater"

Important point: No generalization to regular plural nouns.

Gordon (1986):
- Brown corpus (1,000,000 words):
  - irregular sg compounds [tooth-eater] (153 tokens)
  - irregular pl compounds [teeth-eater] (3 tokens)
  - regular sg compounds [toy-eater] (~...? tokens)
  - regular pl compounds [toys-eater] (0 tokens)

Argument: Irregular pl compounds appear so rarely, they are similar in frequency to regular pl compounds (which never appear because they’re ungrammatical.) But children still produce the irregular pl compounds and do not produce the irregular sg compounds. This is hard to explain if they’re data-driven.

Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 1: Plurals in noun-noun compounds

P&S rebuttals:
- Not clear 3-6 yr old behavior was really true outside the experimental setup (method flaws).
  - Point: Not children’s behavior.

  - Point: Not adult’s behavior either.
Kimball 1973:
It rains, It may rain, It may have rained, It may be raining, It has rained, It has been raining, It is raining, It may have been raining, ...

Rule: (...Aux Verb: {rains, may rain, may have rained, ...}
Aux -> Tense (Modal) (have +en) (be +ing)
(present) (may, might) (have VERBing) (be VERBing)

{past} + (Modal) + {have + en} = may have rained

Kimball 1973:
It rains, It may rain, It may have rained, It may be raining, It has rained, It has been raining, It is raining, It may have been raining, ...

Rule: (...Aux Verb: {rains, may rain, may have rained, ...}
Aux -> Tense (Modal) (have +en) (be +ing)
(present) (may, might) (have VERBing) (be VERBing)
(present) + rain = rains
Kimball 1973:

It rains, It may rain, It may have rained, It may be raining, It has rained, It has been raining, It is raining, It may have been raining,…

Rule: (...) Aux Verb: {rains, may rain, may have rained, …} Aux --> Tense (Modal) (have +en) (be +ing) (past) + {have + en} = had rained

Crucial data to get proper rule sequence have all three optional components:

"It may have been raining"

No examples in 1,000,000 word corpus, vanishingly rare in conversation…

P&S rebuttal:

Is that rule really what children are acquiring? Instead, children may be able to abstract the necessary sequence from other sequences of not exactly that type.

Also, data not so vanishingly rare: hundreds of examples in adult literature (Moby Dick, Wuthering Heights) and many in children’s literature (Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz)

Estimate: 1 approximately every 3000-4000 sentences

The real question: How many is enough? Need a quantitative claim from the linguists.
Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 3: Anaphoric One

Originally, Baker 1978
Recently described accessibly in Foraker et al. (2007)

"I liked the debate about acquisition. You liked the one about modeling."
*I'll walk by the side of the road and you can walk by the one of the river."

Syntactic distribution distinction: Difference between complement-taking nouns (side) and modifier-taking nouns (debate).
Syntactic distinction: complement-taking nouns = Category N, modifier-taking nouns = Category N' (larger than N).
Semantic distinction: Complement-taking nouns are conceptually different from modifier-taking nouns. (side = side of what?, debate can stand by itself)

Necessary Data:

Baker 1978: rule out one = N

Need specific sentence & world situation:
*"Jack wants a red ball. Lily doesn't have one to give him."
(Situation: Lily doesn't have a red ball. She has a purple one.)
Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 3: Anaphoric One

18-month olds behave as if they have the right interpretations (Lidz, Waxman, & Freedman 2003)

Unambiguous data is pretty rare in child-directed speech: (Lidz, Waxman, & Freedman 2003; Pearl & Lidz, submitted)

~0.25% of anaphoric one utterances are unambiguous for one≠category N, but instead one = something larger like N'

Similar P&S rebuttal as before: How rare is too rare? (see Legate & Yang 2002 next time)

Rebuttal of another kind: this is not the crucial evidence “Can be learned from other available data” (Regier & Gahl 2004, Foraker et al. 2007)

…”Not without some other learning constraints/knowledge, too”: Foraker et al. 2007, Pearl & Lidz, submitted

Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 4: Auxiliary Fronting

Chomsky 1971: Adult Knowledge

The girl is easily fooled.
Is the girl easily fooled?

The girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled.
Is the girl who can solve the labyrinth easily fooled?

Someone who is not easily fooled could trick someone who is.
Could someone who is not easily fooled trick someone who is?

Rule: Move first auxiliary?
Rule: Move main-clause auxiliary?
Rule: Move odd-numbered auxiliary?
Rule: Move auxiliary next to female noun?

Chomsky 1971: Child Behavior (Crain & Nakayama (1987))

The girl is easily fooled.
Is the girl easily fooled?

The girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled.
Is the girl who can solve the labyrinth easily fooled?

* Can the girl who solve the labyrinth is easily fooled?

Rule: Move main-clause auxiliary
Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies
Case 4: Auxiliary Fronting
Chomsky 1971: Child Data

The girl is easily fooled. *Is the girl easily fooled?* Very frequent

The girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled. *Can the girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled?* Very frequent

P&S rebuttal:
The girl is easily fooled. *Is the girl easily fooled?* Very frequent

The girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled. *Can the girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled?* Very frequent

Rules out "first front aux" hypothesis: Should be very frequent

What I’m doing is in the shareholders' best interest. *Is what I’m doing in the shareholders' best interest?*

Rules out "front first aux" hypothesis: 15th sentence in WSJ corpus

When you're done, could I borrow your pencil? *Could I borrow your pencil?*

Rules out "front first aux" hypothesis: 180th sentence in WSJ corpus
Pullum & Scholz (2002): Case Studies

Case 4: Auxiliary Fronting

P&S rebuttal:
The girl is easily fooled. Is the girl easily fooled? Very frequent

The other dolly that was in here is where. Where’s the other dolly that was in here? Rules out “front first aux” hypothesis, though not yes/no question: Child-directed speech

The girl who can solve the labyrinth is easily fooled. Is the girl who can solve the labyrinth easily fooled? * Can the girl who solve the labyrinth is easily fooled? Very infrequent

Pullum & Scholz (2002): Summary

Linguists should be careful about what knowledge they think children are acquiring.

It’s not that there is no evidence for the child to learn from in most cases. It’s just that it’s rare. But since linguists haven’t determined how much is enough, then even rare data should be taken seriously. Stay tuned for next class’s discussion for some linguists’ take on a quantitative boundary…

Additional Note: Larger Point about PoS (from Crain & Pietroski (2002))

- "...it’s not enough to mention ways in which children could learn some things without Universal Grammar. To rebut poverty-of-the-stimulus arguments, one has to show how children could learn [everything] adults actually know; and as close investigation reveals, adults know a lot more than casual inspection suggests. That is the nativist’s main point."

Example of linguistic knowledge that’s hard: restrictions on meaning interpretation (see Crain & Pietroski (2002) for details)