

Relating Language Variation to Language Acquisition

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A fundamental question in linguistic theory is whether grammatical variation, across languages and dialects, is a “deep” domain of inquiry, one that supports rich, explanatory generalizations. Even if the invariant aspects of grammar are richly structured, the points of variation might be entirely local and superficial. Indeed, if there is any scientific depth to the study of grammatical variation, one must wonder why so few of the important generalizations have yet been discovered.

In this talk, I will consider a source of evidence that linguists have sometimes neglected: the time course of child language acquisition. A theory of grammatical variation is simultaneously a theory of the child’s hypothesis space during acquisition. I will argue that hypotheses about grammatical variation make testable predictions about the grammatical characteristics that will appear together, and the characteristics that will appear in a determinate order, as the child acquires a given language.

For these acquisitional predictions to be tested, however, some important methodological questions need to be addressed. First, how can we obtain reliable information about a given child’s grammar at a particular moment in development? I will argue for the usefulness of a measure that I call FRU, or “First of Repeated Uses,” as a measure of acquisition that can be applied to longitudinal samples of spontaneous speech. For a given grammatical construction, the FRU marks the point at which the child goes from never using the construction, to using it fairly frequently with a variety of different lexical items. As such, the FRU is applicable only to constructions that are used frequently once they are acquired. Nonetheless, I maintain that the FRU (when used appropriately) can give us a very fine-grained picture of what is happening as the child acquires new grammatical knowledge.

A second major methodological issue needs to be addressed: When a child begins to use a new grammatical construction of the target language, does this mean that the child has acquired the same grammatical knowledge that makes the construction possible in the target language? I will argue that – perhaps surprisingly – it normally does. My argument will be based on fine-grained analyses of children’s acquisition of argument structure and *wh*-movement.

My overall conclusion, based in part on these case studies, will be that deep generalizations about grammatical variation are indeed possible, and that some of the best evidence comes from the time course of children’s language acquisition.