

What can variation tell us about first language acquisition?

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In this paper we argue that language variation can give insight into the mechanisms that children may be using to choose between different grammars and indirectly into the nature of their initial assumptions. We all know that intra and inter-linguistic variation is actually the norm, and children must have a way to deal with this variation. We also know that variation is implicated in language change. Furthermore, we know that in many cases the input the child receives does not transparently reflect the grammar that generates it, and that children may either learn the variation or actually regularize the input. However, we know very little how this actually works. In this paper we propose a path for the acquisition of inflectional morphology, more specifically number morphology, that can explain and make predictions about the effects of input variability, while at the same time supporting the idea that the child is not simply a brute force statistical learner. The empirical support will come from both comprehension and production studies in acquisition of plural morphology in Chilean and Mexican Spanish (Miller 2007) and European and Brazilian Portuguese (Castro and Ferrari Neto 2007; Correa et al 2005; Schmitt and Miller 2008). We provide evidence that the quality of the input affects children's decisions and that although children's seem to behave probabilistically in production their comprehension patterns reflect discrete grammar choices.