591B
Second Language Acquisition

Week 2. First Language Acquisition

Do kids learn the grammar by listening to their parents?

- *What did you see the book about on the table?
- *Who did Mary say that bought coffee?
- Eight very lazy elephants drank brandy?

- Linguists' theories: built by considering both grammatical *and ungrammatical* sentences.
- Kids: Don't hear ungrammatical sentences, nor even all of the grammatical sentences.

Nature vs. Nurture

- Human learning derives from innate, genetic predisposition or derives from social, cultural experiences.

- Skinner: language is a copying and memorizing mechanism, behaviorism
- Chomsky: child built an entire on little data available to him

Universal Grammar

- Innate core

- Set of principles and parameters

- Principles: apply to all natural languages
- Parameters: variation

Positive and negative evidence

- Adults know if a given sentence S is grammatical or ungrammatical. This is part of the knowledge kids gain through language acquisition.

- Kids hear grammatical sentences (*positive evidence*)
- Kids are not reliably told which sentences are ungrammatical (*no negative evidence*)

Kids often *ignore* explicit negative evidence…

McNeill (1966)

– Nobody don't like me.
– No, say 'nobody likes me.'
– Nobody don't like me.

[*repeats eight times*]

– No, now listen carefully; say 'nobody likes me.'
– Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

Kids often *ignore* explicit negative evidence…

Braime (1971)

- Want other one spoon, daddy.
- You mean, you want the other spoon.
- Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.
- Can you say 'the other spoon'?
- Other…one…spoon
- Say 'other'
- Other
- 'Spoon'
- Spoon
- 'Other spoon'
- Other…spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

How about *implicit* negative evidence, then?

- Do kids get "implicit" negative evidence?
- For example: Do adults understand grammatical sentences and not understand ungrammatical ones?
- Do adults respond positively to grammatical sentences and negatively to ungrammatical ones?

Maybe some do, but kids' experiences differ…

- Different parents respond differently
  - Eve & Sarah's parents ask clarification questions after ill-formed *wh*-questions.
  - Adam's parents ask clarification after well-formed *wh*-questions…and after past tense errors.
- How can kids figure out what correlates with grammaticality in *their* situation?

And what feedback there may be disappears…

- Adam and Sarah showed almost no reply contingencies after age 4
- But they still made errors after age 4
- Yet they still stopped making those errors by the time they became adults (*learning* didn't cease).

And in a way, it's moot anyway…

- One of the striking things about child language is how few errors they actually make.
- For negative feedback to work, the kids have to *make* the errors (so that it can get the negative response).
- But they don't make the errors in the first place.

Do kids already know everything?

- Well, no. Clearly. No matter where a person is born (i.e. to parents speaking whatever language), the person will pick up the language spoken in the ambient childhood environment.
- Languages can be described in terms of rules (i.e. form plural noun in English by adding -s), and languages differ in what rules describe them.
- Kids must somehow come to know these rules, different for each language.

Let's try figuring out some rules…

- 1 3 5 7 …what's next?
- Answer: 11. Then 13. Then 17.
- 1 2 3 5 …what's next?
- Answer: 8. Then 13. Then 21.
- 1 3 5 7 …what's next?
- Answer: 9. Then 11. Then 13.
- Hmm.

Let's try this out…

- ABCAE
- CABAE?
- DCABFCAE
- CDABFCAE?
- ABFCAECD
- ———————?

Let's try this out…

- ABCAE
- CABAE?
- DCABFCAE
- CDABFCAE?
- ABFCAECD
- ———————?

- The dog was the winner.
- Was the dog the winner?
- Fido was the dog that was the winner.
- Was Fido the dog that was the winner?
- The dog that was the winner was Fido.
- Was the dog that was the winner Fido?
- = CABFCAED?

Yes-no questions

18) The man is here.
19) Is the man here?
20) The man who is here is eating dinner.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Move the first *is* (or modal, auxiliary) to the front.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Move the first *is* after the initial noun phrase to the front.

Yes-no questions

21) The man who is here is eating dinner.
22) *Is the man who here is eating dinner?
23) Is the man who is here eating dinner?

- No kid's ever said (22) to mean (23). Why?
- Kids don't even *entertain* Hypothesis 1.

What kids need to do

- Learning the L1, a kid needs to hear what's going on in the Primary Linguistic Data and set the parameters to the setting which corresponds to the target language.

So what is the language faculty?

- Part of being human (genetic).
- Provides parameters by which languages may vary (constrains the possible human languages).
- Provides universal principles of language (either parameterized or invariant).
- Also includes a component for first language acquisition (effortless, fast).

L1 acquisition, in sum.

- We posit a genetic predisposition for language, something which guides the kinds of languages kids learn (Universal Grammar):
  - Kids learn *fast*
  - Kids end up with systems that are more complicated than the input data justifies (they can judge ungrammatical sentences in the same way as other native speakers).
  - Kids don't fail to learn language despite differences in environment
  - Kids seem to go through stages of acquisition which are similar across kids.

Another parameter: The domain for anaphors (like *himself*)

24) Sam believes [that Harry overestimates **himself**]

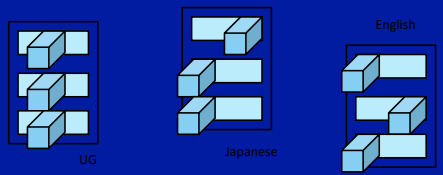
25) Sam-wa [Harry-ga **zibun**-o tunet-ta to] it-ta]
Sam-top Harry-nom **self**-acc pinch-past-that say-past
'Sam said that Harry pinched (him)self.'

Principle A

- **Principle A.** An anaphor must have a higher antecedent in some domain.
- *Parameter:*
  - Option (a): domain = smallest clause containing the reflexive pronoun
  - Option (b): domain = entire sentence containing the reflexive pronoun

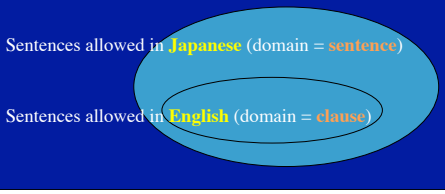
The model of language

- Part of the genetic endowment (UG) is a specification of the parameters by which languages can vary from one another.



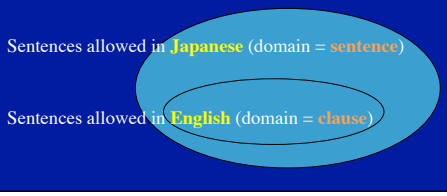
Wait… how can a kid set this parameter?

- The set of relevant sentences allowed in English is a ***subset*** of the set of sentences allowed in Japanese. Starting with the English value, you could learn the Japanese value, but not vice-versa.



Wait… how can a kid set this parameter?

- A possible way out for a kid would be to *start* supposing the English parameter setting (the subset) and move to the Japanese setting if there is evidence for that in the Primary Linguistic Data.



Points

- Language is complex beyond what kids are taught growing up; kids learn L1 quickly and uniformly.
- This is made possible by UG, which delimits the set of possible languages; UG provides parameters by which languages may differ, LAD sets those parameters based on PLD.
- L2 acquisition is typically "less successful" presuming the goal is native speaker-like knowledge of the language. Also typically harder.
- L2 acquisition is affected by various things (motivation, intelligence, strategies, confidence) which don't seem to affect L1A.