

Invited Talks

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What counts? The graded nature of rule abstraction in child language

Quantitative corpus linguistics plays a decisive role in usage-based, constructivist approaches to language acquisition. First, evidence is needed that the input available to the child provides the necessary information for abstracting the target language system(s). Second, the distributional properties of the language input and its uptake by the learner help to identify the learning mechanisms, especially with regard to refining the relative contribution of functional factors and perceptual factors like salience and frequency. Recent research has shown that the input available to the child highlights a subset of the linguistic system in which the basic morphological and syntactic properties are available in a rather consistent fashion. The findings give rise to a third perspective in quantitative acquisition research: what does the child generalize over? If we assume that children do not have access to adult-like categories, and do not command the full range of options of a particular structure, we have to define how to conceive of the intermediate levels of acquisition. In this presentation I will use extensive corpus data on German child language to show how German noun inflection (plural classes, declension classes) is acquired through a gradual generalization over the phonotactic properties of the noun root. This results in acquisition sequences that are largely error-free although or because the underlying generalizations are rather local.
