

Language Acquisition as Skill Learning

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Language acquisition is often viewed as a problem of inference, in which the child—like a “mini-linguist”—tries to piece together the abstract grammar of her native language from incomplete and noisy input. This “language-as-knowledge” viewpoint contrasts with a more recent alternative, in which the challenge of language acquisition is practical, not theoretical: by practicing across myriads of social interactions, the child gradually learns to understand and produce language. In this talk, I explore some key implications of this “language-as-skill” framework, focusing on how constraints arising from the need to process language in the here-and-now shape acquisition. Because experience with language is fundamental to becoming a skilled language user, this perspective predicts substantial differences across individual language users as well as across languages. I discuss evidence from developmental and adult studies, highlighting experience-driven variation across individuals and languages (including new results from Danish). I conclude that language acquisition may be best construed as skill learning, on a par with learning other complex human skills such as riding a bicycle or playing a musical instrument. By reconnecting language to psychological mechanisms of learning and memory, this perspective moreover offers the possibility for a reintegration of the language sciences.

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