The Acquisition of Linguistic Variation: What is and what isn’t innate?

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Work on word order variation within a traditional generative approach has mainly focused on variation across languages, typically accounted for by different parameter settings provided by UG. However, in order to arrive at a theory of linguistic variation and to identify innate constraints on possible variation, it is necessary to also study aspects of language that cannot be innate. Focusing mainly on English and Scandinavian languages, this paper discusses a number of cases of word order variation that is found within languages and thus in the input children are exposed to. This variation represents exceptions to what has been argued to be parameters (e.g. V2) as well as other language-internal variation (e.g. different subject positions). In all cases it is shown that children produce both word orders from the earliest attestable stages, making the same fine distinctions in syntax and information structure as in the target language, with only a slight delay in syntactic movement, argued to be due to economy (cf. e.g. Anderssen & Westergaard 2010, Westergaard 2009, 2011). The paper thus makes the following argument: Since this complex variation has to be learned from the input, and children are clearly good at it from early on, there is no need for parameters such as VO/OV or V2. These word order rules are salient in the input and frequently attested, and there is no reason why they should not also be learned from exposure to the primary linguistic data. Thus, the main question in language acquisition should not be poverty of the stimulus, but rather a focus on the nature of the endowment that enables children to learn fine details from the input.

The findings reported support other recent studies both within constructivist and generative approaches to language acquisition which have observed that children are ‘conservative learners’, hardly ever making errors of commission in their spontaneous production. That is, there are few cases of overgeneralization attested in child language syntax. Within the constructivist camp, this is argued to be due to children’s focus on the input: Language is learned in an item-based and usage-based fashion, where children are picking up unanalyzed chunks and frames and making generalizations only after a large number of such frames have been learned (e.g. Tomasello 2003, 2006, Rowland & Pine 2000, 2003, Ambridge et al. 2006). Within the generative camp, these findings have been combined with a parametric account, e.g. in Snyder (2007) or Yang (2002, 2010). According to the latter, children are endowed with a set of parameters as well as a powerful statistical learning mechanism, allowing them to evaluate evidence for and against competing grammars or parameter settings.

The present paper presents an alternative model, where the distinction between variation and optionality (free variation) is crucial. Only the latter is argued to be dependent on input frequencies. Conservative learning is accounted for by the existence of micro-cues, i.e. small pieces of syntactic structure emerging in children’s I-language grammar on exposure to the relevant input. This model is a generative approach assuming a UG consisting of syntactic primitives (features), principles of structure building and universal constraints, but crucially no parameters. This genetic endowment enables children to parse the linguistic input and formulate micro-cues in their I-language grammars. Thus, micro-cues do not exist in UG, but are part of the grammar of a specific language – i.e. they emerge in the acquisition process as a result of the interaction between UG and the input.

According to the micro-cue model, children do not learn the major generalizations for their language first, but start out with small pieces of structure and build up their grammars incrementally, typically making generalizations that are supported by positive evidence in the input, which makes ‘unlearning’ unnecessary. When making syntactic generalizations,
children crucially do not immediately extend to a major category, but only within a class or subcategory, i.e. one micro-cue at a time. This means that children occasionally make even finer distinctions than what is found in the input. By studying these phenomena, we may arrive at an understanding of natural classes provided by UG.

References