Functional biases in acquisition: Language learners restructure their input to reduce uncertainty

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Abstract
Languages around the world share striking commonalities. Functional approaches argue that grammatical structures that facilitate processing and communication are more likely to persist cross-linguistically [1, 2]. By what means functional pressures may come to shape grammar over time, however, remains unknown. In two artificial languages, we explore the possibility that functional pressures operate during language acquisition, biasing learners to deviate from the input they receive. In particular, we investigate whether language learners have a bias against excessive uncertainty about the intended meaning.

The Phenomenon
Differential case-marking cross-linguistically
- found in natural languages (e.g., Sinhalese, Hindi)
- governed by several hierarchies [3, 4]:
  - person
  - definiteness
  - animacy: human > animate > inanimate

Experiment 1: Optional object-marking

An artificial language learning study
- tested 20 monolingual native English speakers
- 4-day procedure

Procedure
1. Input Grammar
- Word Order: SOV (60%), OSV (40%)
- Object case-marked? 60%
- Animacy of object: human (50%), inanimate (50%)

Input Lexicon
- Object noun: 5 human, 5 inanimate
- Subject noun: 5 human
- Verb: 2 transitive
- Case-marker: kah

Analysis
The data was analyzed using mixed logit models [5] with the maximum random effect structure justified by the data. All effects reported below are significant at p<0.05 on the final day of training (unless indicated otherwise) while controlling for other factors.

Results
- Fig. 1: Object-marking is sensitive to animacy
- Fig. 2: Object-marking is sensitive to word order

Discussion
1. Language learners have a bias against excessive uncertainty in form-meaning mapping and restructure the input they receive to reduce this uncertainty.
   - Learners use more overt case-marking when referents occur in their atypical positions, i.e., when the uncertainty about the intended meaning is highest.
2. This behavior cannot be explained by native-language bias since learners induce a structure into the language they learn that is not present either in the input or their native language.
3. Learning biases mirror typologically frequent patterns (see also [6, 7, 8] as well as [9] for a recent review) such as differential case-marking systems and can thus offer an account of some of the structural similarities found in natural languages.

Experiment 2: Optional subject-marking

Input Lexicon
- Subject noun: 5 human, 5 inanimate
- Object noun: 5 inanimate
- Verb: 2 transitive
- Case-marker: kah

Input Grammar
- Word Order: SOV (60%), OSV (40%)
- Subject case-marked? 60%
- Animacy of subject: human (50%), inanimate (50%)

Participants
- 20 monolingual native English speakers

Goals
- Is the higher proportion of case-marker use in Exp. 1 due to a bias to mark the atypical as hypothesized and not to certain properties associated with animacy?
- Is differential case-marker use across word orders driven by a bias to mark the atypical (marked word order) or by a bias to provide disambiguating information as early as possible?

Results
- Fig. 3: Subject-marking is sensitive to animacy
- Fig. 4: Subject-marking is sensitive to word order

References

Acknowledgements
Choi and Tara Stanley for their help collecting subject data.
NIH grant DC00167 to ELN. We thank Colleen Dolan, Vivian Alfred P. Sloan Fellowship and a Wilmot Award to TFJ and by this work was supported in part by NSF grant BCS-0845059, an NELS40, Cambridge, MA.