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Book Review

Language and the Learning Curve

By ANAT NINIO
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
[Pp. 206.] ISBN 0-19-929982-X. £24.95

Anat Ninio's *Language and the Learning Curve* presents an intriguing synthesis of five different principles regarding children's learning of syntax. These five principles, elucidated in each of the main chapters, address distinct (but interrelated) aspects of the syntax learning process. In synthesizing these principles, and the claims embodied by each, Ninio draws on theoretically distinct approaches to language development. The result is an interesting and provocative theoretical proposal, supported by empirical evidence.

Chapter 1 deals with the notion of valency, the idea that verbs, by virtue of their meaning, specify the number of arguments that are needed to 'complete' the predicate-argument structure. This is very similar to the idea that verbs must assign a certain number of thematic roles, or that they 'subcategorize' for a certain number of Noun Phrases (for example, a transitive, or bivalent, verb requires two arguments). Ninio argues that young children learn the valency of each predicate in their growing vocabulary, and they use this knowledge in conjunction with the syntactic operation of Merge (à la Chomsky) or Dependency (à la Tesnière) to combine words appropriately.

Chapter 2 starts from the position that syntax acquisition involves the mechanism of transfer: new lexical items are assimilated in analogy to lexical items and constructions already acquired. Thus, children's use of verbs improves with practise over time, and this improvement becomes increasingly rapid with more practise. It is argued that this type of learning is best described by a power-law function, since it begins with a slow improvement and gradually increases in (non-linear) acceleration.

Chapter 3 focuses on lexicalism, the view that constructions are built up from the lexical properties of individual words, rather than words being filled into slots provided by an abstract schema or structural framework. Ninio's claim is that both child and adult syntax is lexicalist in nature: children need not acquire any abstract structural representations because such do not exist in the adult grammar either. In this, Ninio's view follows the Chomskyan Minimalist approach to syntax; however, her account remains distinctly non-Chomskyan in attributing learning to analogy and transfer.

In Chapter 4 it is argued that because the association between a verb's syntactic behaviour (e.g. whether it selects a direct or indirect object) and its semantic behaviour (in terms of its semantic subclass and the thematic roles assigned to its arguments) is messy at best, children should not rely on this association to draw generalizations about novel verbs. Instead, learners should rely on 'similarity of form', which is defined in terms of 'word order and case-marking on the depending phrase'.

In Chapter 5 Ninio draws on Complexity Theory to make the claim that children's process of acquiring language amounts to them 'linking' into the complex system of their ambient language. The nodes in the network of language are the speakers and the utterances they use, and children link into this system by noticing the connections between these nodes, much like in a neural network. However, she argues that frequency in the input only plays a partial, not a deterministic, role in learning since children tend to learn predicates that are meaningful and/or useful to their communicative needs, not necessarily those that are used most frequently by adults.

As a whole, the book reads well. Each chapter is internally well organized, including an overview of the theoretical topic of the chapter, a section that focuses on the implication of the claim for acquisition, a section providing developmental

evidence for the claim, and a helpful conclusion section which summarizes the chapter. The book's organization is good, although I might have placed Chapter 3 earlier in the book: reading it resolved some lingering questions I had while reading the first two chapters, in particular about theoretical assumptions the author was making.

The weakest aspect of the book is the exclusion of semantics from the verb-learning process in Chapter 3. By the end of the book semantics appears to play a significant role in which predicates are learned earliest by children. While it is undisputed that the relationship between argument structure and verb semantics is not straightforward, excluding semantics in the proposal for how verbs are learned seems too strong, and it leads to confusion about how verb

meanings are learned and how meaning should play a role in the framework presented in Chapter 5.

Nevertheless, this book presents a very interesting and well-researched proposal for the acquisition of syntax. It is refreshing in its attempt to forge a framework for understanding language learning that goes beyond the traditional camps of 'innateness' versus 'statistical learning'. It is worth reading for anyone interested in formal modelling of language learning.

MISHA BECKER
*Linguistics Department,
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC, USA;
e-mail: mbecker@email.unc.edu*