

First language acquisition in the languages of the world: differences and similarities

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Children face a myriad of challenges when learning their first language(s), ranging from extracting meaningful units out of a noisy speech stream, attaching labels to changing referents and mastering the quirks of syntax and morphology inherent to the over 7000 languages spoken in the world today. A fundamental question in first language acquisition is whether the resources and the strategies used by children learning language are shared across languages, or whether they are language-specific.

General properties of the input seem to be uniformly available for all children regardless of their target language. For instance, other things being equal, more frequent linguistic units will feature in children's repertoire earlier (Ambridge et al. 2015). The conditional frequency of the arrangement of units – i.e., which elements follow or precede others – for word segmentation (Pelucchi, Hay & Saffran 2009) as well as the distributional properties of linguistic units (Hills 2013) seem to have a similarly broad scope. In addition to the statistical properties of the input, species-wide behaviors, like the tendency to interpret pointing gestures as a communicative act, the drive towards cooperative communication (Tomasello 2009) and innate perceptual biases (e.g. towards syllabic well-formedness, Johnson et al. 2003) constitute the best generalizations in the field of first language acquisition.

In addition to these general strategies, individual languages might provide easier or more salient pathways to the acquisition of specific features. Word order cues, for instance, might be more reliable (and hence more useful) for specific tasks in some languages than in others, for instance when determining agency (Bates et al. 1984,

Chan, Lieven and Tomasello 2009) or when learning properties of objects (Ramscar et al. 2010). Affixation preference (Gervain and Erra 2012) and stress allocation (Tyler and Cutler 2009) might bias the attention towards one particular word edge.

This divide is, however, discussable. A considerable amount of the research aimed at capturing universal learning strategies has been conducted in standard European languages (and most saliently, English) and some of the mechanisms that are deemed to be language-specific might be artifacts stemming from the lack of a comparative perspective on first language acquisition and data sparsity.

The goal of this workshop is to bring together specialists on first language acquisition that conduct research either on:

- 1) the acquisition of language specific features (such as grammatical categories or morphological complexity) in relation to general acquisition strategies.
- 2) languages underrepresented in the literature, which could help understand the limits and the plasticity of language-independent learning mechanisms as well as expanding the list of language-specific strategies or
- 3) comparative settings, contrasting the same or similar phenomena in a range of languages.

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