

There are common underlying structures in human language that allow children to learn any language: input universals and first language acquisition

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A crucial part in understanding of how language could have evolved is to understand how language can be transmitted. One of the most important transmission processes is first language acquisition. However, how children manage to learn any of the thousands of human languages is an unresolved puzzle. The variation exhibited by the more than 7000 languages spoken today is mind boggling suggesting and this suggests an extremely flexible learning mechanism. Infants no matter what language they are exposed to manage to build up their grammar and their lexicon from the speech that surrounds them by implicit learning in the first few years of their life. But how do they do this? One mechanism is statistical learning. We do know that children are excellent in detecting patterns, and their statistical learning abilities have been established in various experiments. However, so far we know very little about what patterns they actually can rely on in their native languages to make use of these statistical learning mechanisms. In this talk I will present a number of potentially universal patterns that are found in maximally diverse languages. I will show how these patterns allow for bottom up linguistic categorizations and I will suggest a number of input universals which help explaining how children can learn any human language.