

Knowledge of Language

1 Some Central Questions

- How are we able to comprehend a potentially infinite number of novel sentences? The problem of *discrete infinity*.

- What does linguistic knowledge consist of? We know things that we were never taught. How did this knowledge arise?

Specifically, how do children succeed in acquiring language on the basis of an input that is underspecified and impoverished?

- How do we account for 'language universals'?

2 Implicit Knowledge

2.1 Errors and Non-errors in Child Language

Yes-No Question Formation

- (1) a. Has John eaten a cake?
(John has eaten a cake.)
- b. Will Lila come to the party?
(Lila will come to the party.)

Any number of rules can be devised to derive the interrogative Y/N questions from their declarative counterparts.

- (2) a. Swap the first two words around
- b. Swap the first verb with the first noun phrase
- c. Swap the subject and the verbal element after it

Test Cases:

- (3) a. The man has eaten a cake.
- b. The woman who is singing is happy.
- c. The book that John is reading is on sale.

While child language differs in interesting ways from the target adult language, errors of the sort predicted by (2a, b) are never made by children. This suggests that children are predisposed towards postulating rules of a particular kind.

2.2 Pronominal Reference: a case of implicit knowledge

- (4) a. John likes him.
b. He likes John.
c. He likes him.
- (5) a. Liina introduced John to him.
b. Liina introduced him to John.
c. Liina introduced him to him.
- (6) a. 1. John dislikes his own brother.
2. He dislikes John's brother.
3. He dislikes his own brother.
b. 1. John's brother dislikes him.
2. His brother dislikes John.
3. His own brother dislikes him.
- (7) a. 1. Liina introduced John to his (long lost) sister.
2. Liina introduced him to John's (long lost) sister.
3. Liina introduced him to his (long lost) sister.
b. 1. Liina introduced John's (long lost) sister to him.
2. Liina introduced his (long lost) sister to John.
3. Liina introduced his (long lost) sister to him.
- (8) a. John thinks that he is smart.
b. He thinks that John is smart.
c. He thinks that he is smart.
- (9) a. 1. John thinks that Kathy believes that he is smart.
2. He thinks that Kathy believes that John is smart.
3. He thinks that Kathy believes that he is smart.
b. 1. John thinks that he believes that Kathy is smart.
2. He thinks that John believes that Kathy is smart.
3. He thinks that he believes that Kathy is smart.
c. 1. Kathy thinks that John believes that he is smart.
2. Kathy thinks that he believes that John is smart.
3. Kathy thinks that he believes that he is smart.
- (10) a. 1. John is pleased by the fact that Chunghye admires him.
2. He is pleased by the fact that Chunghye admires John.
3. He is pleased by the fact that Chunghye admires him.
b. 1. The fact that Liina admires John pleases him.
2. The fact that Liina admires him pleases John.
3. The fact that Liina admires him pleases him.
- (11) a. 1. The boy who admires Liina gave a book to her.
2. The boy who admires her gave a book to Liina.
3. The boy who admires her gave a book to her.
b. 1. Liina gave a book to the boy who admires her.
2. She gave a book to the boy who admires Liina.
3. She gave a book to the boy who admires her.
- (12) a. 1. John was smiling when he left the room.
2. He was smiling when John left the room.
3. He was smiling when he left the room.
b. 1. When John left the room, he was smiling.
2. When he left the room, John was smiling.
3. When he left the room, he was smiling.