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The Multiple-Cue Account of Language Acquisition

Background

Strategies and cues that infants and young children use to acquire their language have been typically studied in isolation. For example, word learning has been looked at in terms of innate biases, socio-pragmatic information, and cross-situational statistics; and sentence processing in terms of semantic and morphosyntactic cues. More recent research has shown that infants and young children rely on multiple cues when acquiring language. However, how these different cues are integrated and whether the reliance on different cues change across development remain unclear. Prior language experience of individual children may also play a role in how they use the different cues.

Aims and Methods

The suggested project will investigate how infants and young children integrate multiple cues to acquire language, and how the use of different cues changes across development and varies by prior language experience. There will be scope to compare monolingual and bilingual language development – whether and how they draw on the different word-learning cues differently. The focus can be on word learning or sentence processing. A range of research methods can be used, including behavioural studies, eye-tracking, corpus analysis, and naturalistic observation. The use of neuroimaging

techniques such as fNIRS and EEG is also possible.

Relevance

The multidisciplinary project, bringing together Psychology and Linguistics, will advance our understanding of how infants and young children acquire their language and potentially inform pedagogical strategies that can better prepare young children for schooling.

Training

The candidate's research activity will be based in Durham, Psychology. Besides training in general research skills, the candidate will receive training in developmental research, eye-tracking, advanced data analysis (in R), and corpus analysis.

Suitable for

PhD and MSc by Research students.

References and Further Reading

Chan, K. C. J., & Monaghan, P. (2025). Flexible use of word learning strategies: Monolingual and bilingual children's word learning under different language contexts. *Journal of Child Language*, 1–24.

de Ruyter, L. E., Lieven, E. V., Brandt, S., & Theakston, A. L. (2020). Interactions between givenness and clause order in children's processing of complex sentences. *Cognition*, 198, 104130.