

Grammars and Populations

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One of the puzzles of language is the source of grammar change. While some such change clearly arises outside the language system itself, in language contact or perhaps conscious innovation, not all change can plausibly be attributed to exogenous factors. Finding endogenous factors in change, however, is difficult. On the one hand, the grammatical systems of adults seem fixed and resistant to modification. On the other hand, children are notably excellent language learners, who achieve the target grammar at a young age, seemingly complete with all its details and irregularities. But if neither adults nor children introduce modifications into the grammatical system, we are at an impasse. I propose, as one possible way out of this puzzling situation, a reconsideration of the accuracy of language learning by children. Instead of supposing that native language acquisition produces a perfect copy of the target in the learner, we consider evidence that learners acquire a close but imperfect copy, close enough that the difference between the copy and the original may go unnoticed by speakers, yet linguistically distinct. From a population perspective, this scenario implies the existence of a population of grammars in every speech community. Forces of drift and selection will act on this population over time to produce the macro-level changes that we observe.