

Child generalization, Language innovation

Ailis Cournane

New York University

Development in both the child and the historical record involves grammatical (re-)mapping. The child progressively discovers which input forms signify which meanings; she actively creates and generalizes form-meaning pairings. Likewise, form-meaning pairings in the historical record are regularly redrawn in systematic ways, constrained by the architecture of the grammar and mind. For over 100 years, linguists interested in change have appealed to the child innovator to explain innovations (Paul 1920 [1880]; Meillet 1958 [1912]; Lightfoot 1977; Labov 1989; Roberts & Roussou 2003; Kroch 2005, i.a). In this talk, I use evidence from modal acquisition to argue in favour of this explanation for change. Child learners are systematically – and necessarily – unfaithful to certain properties of the input during the process of development. Their budding grammars productively generalize, regardless of whether nascent form-meaning pairings yet match the input (Crain et al. 2006; Hudson Kam & Newport 2009; Yang 2016, i.a.).

Modals like *want*, *must*, *probably* or *have to* exhibit complex form-meaning relationships (e.g., Hacquard 2013). I draw from acquisition studies on modals (e.g., Cournane 2014, 2015; Harrigan et al. 2016; Cournane & Pérez-Leroux, in prep) to show that children posit non-adult semantics for modal forms during development. These innovations are compatible with predictions from modal change (e.g., root > epistemic; Traugott 1989) and with modal universals (from typologically-informed semantic theories, e.g., Kratzer 2012), but diverge from the input.

In sum, I argue that normal child generalization processes create input-divergent form-meaning pairings that may diffuse into the child's speech community and become language innovations.