Input and Intake in Language Acquisition

Jeffrey Lidz
University of Maryland

The contribution that learners make to language acquisition is often revealed through arguments from the poverty of the stimulus. In cases where the input is underspecified for the the structural properties that generated it, learners fill in the blanks. This perspective suggests that when there is ample information about some grammatical feature in the input, learners will be able to track it. In such cases learning should be trivial. Similarly, theories of language acquisition that focus on children's prodigious statistical learning capacities also predict that when statistical generalizations are evident in the input, learners will converge on the right generalizations. In this paper, we consider a case of learning in which learners fail to use highly reliable statistical correlations when acquiring their language. I focus on noun classes in Tsez, whose members are probabalistically associated with semantic and phonological features. The semantic features are more reliable than the phonological features, but children overvalue the predictiveness of the phonological features. We argue that this results from constraints on the information is available for learners at different stages of development, highlighting the ways that some statistical generalizations can be filtered out by a kind of feature blindness.