

Two paths in child language learning

We are trying to better understand how the child uses language input to acquire phonology, grammar, and lexicon. Researchers agree that much of this learning is driven by what children hear in real-life contexts. What is less clear is how children are processing this input data. One approach portrays children as little sponges that soak up all the patterns encountered. This approach assumes a powerful statistical learning device supported by a vast memory for specific sequences. Both usage-based linguistics and facts about the capacity of the brain align well with this approach. An alternative approach views the child as learning from a few instances through use of focused attention and hypotheses about relations and meanings. The ways in which learning is driven by a search for meaning aligns well with this approach. I will argue that the child learns by interweaving the two learning paths and that each is supported by specific neural mechanisms for the consolidation of new learning which vary markedly across linguistic levels. Moreover, the two paths operate continually, allowing each to adjust for limitations in the other.