## One model for the learning of language



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# Outline

- Overview of learnability & formal languages
- Learning model
  - Simple formal languages
  - Artificial language learning
  - Simplified English CFG
- Three related lines of ongoing work
  - Human experiments
  - Recursion in monkeys and human groups
  - Algorithm learning in indigenous Amazonians

# Gold's learnability result

 Gold (1967) showed that positive evidence is not enough for learners to necessarily identify their parent's target grammar (see Johnson 2004)



• Gold's theorem motivated a lot of theorizing about linguistic nativism, averaging a citation every 4 days since 1967! (e.g. Wexler & Culicover's *Formal Principles of Language Acquisition*)



## 6.3 The Logical Problem of Language Acquisition

What follows is a fairly technical proof of the idea that parts of our linguistic system are at least plausibly construed as an innate, in-built system. If you aren't interested in this proof (and the problems with it), then you can reasonably skip ahead to section 6.4.

The argument in this section is that a productive system like the rules of Language probably could not be learned or acquired. Infinite systems are in principle, given certain assumptions, both unlearnable and unacquirable. Since we'll show that syntax is an infinite system, we shouldn't have been able to acquire it. So it follows that it is built in. The argument presented here is based on an unpublished paper by Alec Marantz, but is based on an argument dating back to at least Chomsky (1965).

First here's a sketch of the proof, which takes the classical form of an argument by modus ponens:

Premise (i): Syntax is a productive, recursive and infinite system.
<u>Premise (ii): Rule-governed infinite systems are unacquirable.</u>
Conclusion: Therefore syntax is an unacquirable system. Since we have such a system,

it follows that at least parts of syntax are innate.

The so-called Innateness Hypothesis, which claims that crucial components of our tacit linguistic knowledge are not learned through experience but are given by our biological/genetic specifications, is not really a hypothesis. Rather, it is an empirical conclusion mainly based on observations of child language acquisition, one of which is now known as the *Argument from the Poverty of Stimulus* (APS).

Empirical re-assessment of stimulus poverty arguments<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

It is a fact that the child learner does not entertain logically possible but empirically impossible linguistic hypotheses, despite the absence of sufficient disconfirming evidence. While Pullum & Scholz claim to have shown the existence of disconfirming evidence, they fail to demonstrate its sufficiency. By situating the acquisition problem in a quantitative and comparative framework, we show that the evidence is, after all, insufficient. Hence the argument from the poverty of the stimulus, and the innateness of linguistic knowledge, stand umchallenged.

#### 1. Introduction

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## Child-directed speech supports hierarchical structure



Child-directed speech would lead an ideal learner to choose a hierarchical grammar over alternatives.



### The learnability of abstract syntactic principles

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

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Keywords: Poverty of stimulus Bayesian modeling Language learnability Children acquiring language infer the correct form of syntactic constructions for which they appear to have little or no direct evidence, avoiding simple but incorrect generalizations that would be consistent with the data they receive. These generalizations must be guided by some inductive bias - some abstract knowledge - that leads them to prefer the correct hypotheses even in the absence of directly supporting evidence. What form do these inductive constraints take? It is often argued or assumed that they reflect innately specified knowledge of language. A classic example of such an argument moves from the phenomenon of auxiliary fronting in English interrogatives to the conclusion that children must innately know that syntactic rules are defined over hierarchical phrase structures rather than linear sequences of words (e.g., Chomsky, 1965, 1971, 1980; Crain & Nalayama, 1987). Here we use a Bayesian framework for grammar induction to address a version of this argument and show that, given typical child-directed speech and certain innate domain-general capacities, an ideal learner could recognize the hierarchical phrase structure of language without having this knowledge innately specified a spart of the language faculty. We discuss the implications of this analysis for accounts of human language faculty.

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### 1. Introduction

Nature, or nurture? To what extent is human mental capacity a result of innate domain-specific predispositions, and to what extent does it result from domain-general learning based on data in the environment? One of the tasks of modern cognitive science is to move past this classic nature/nurture dichotomy and elucidate just how innate biases and domain-general learning might interact to guide development in different domains of knowledge. Scientific inquiry in one domain, language learners make grammatical generalizations that appear to go beyond what is immediately justified by the evidence in the input (Chomsky, 1965, 1980). One such class of gener-

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0010-0277/\$ - see front matter © 2010 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved. doi:10.1016/j.cognition.2010.11.001 alizations concerns the hierarchical phrase structure of language: children appear to favor hierarchical rules that operate on grammatical constructs such as phrases and clauses over linear rules that operate only on the sequence of words, even in the apparent absence of direct evidence supporting this preference. Such a preference, in the absence of direct supporting evidence, may suggest that human learners innately know a deep organizing principle of natural language, that syntax is organized in terms of hierarchical phrase structures.

In outline form, this is one version of the "Poverty of the Stimulus" (or PoS) argument for innate knowledge. It is a classic move in cognitive science, but in some version this style of reasoning is as old as the Western philosophical tradition. Plato's argument for innate principles of geometry or morality, Leibniz' argument for an innate ability to understand necessary truths, and Kant's argument for an innate spatiotemporal ordering of experience are all used to infer the prior existence of certain mental capacities

## Child-directed speech supports hierarchical structure

Log prior, likelihood, and posterior probabilities of each hand-designed grammar for each level of evidence. Because numbers are negative, smaller absolute values correspond to higher probability. If two grammars have log probabilities that differ by n, their actual probabilities differ by  $e^n$ ; thus, the best hierarchical phrase-structure grammar CFG-L is  $e^{101}$  ( $\sim 10^{43}$ ) times more probable than the best linear grammar REG-M. Bold values indicate the highest posterior score at each level.

Corpus	Probability	FLAT	REG-N	REG-M	REG-B	1-ST	CFG-S	CFG-L
Level 1	Prior	-99	-148	-124	-117	-94	-155	-192
	Likelihood	-17	-20	-19	-21	-36	-27	-27
	Posterior	- <b>116</b>	-168	-143	-138	-130	-182	-219
Level 2	Prior	-630	-456	-442	-411	-201	-357	-440
	Likelihood	-134	-147	-157	-162	-275	-194	-177
	Posterior	-764	-603	-599	-573	- <b>476</b>	-551	-617
Level 3	Prior Likelihood Posterior	$-1198 \\ -282 \\ -1480$	-663 -323 -986	-614 -333 -947	-529 -346 -875	-211 -553 - <b>764</b>	-454 -402 -856	-593 -377 -970
Level 4	Prior	-5839	-1550	-1134	-850	-234	-652	-1011
	Likelihood	-1498	-1761	-1918	-2042	-3104	-2078	-1956
	Posterior	-7337	-3311	-3052	-2892	-3338	- <b>2730</b>	-2967
Level 5	Prior	-10,610	-1962	-1321	-956	-244	-732	-1228
	Likelihood	-2856	-3376	-3584	-3816	-5790	-3917	-3703
	Posterior	-13,466	-5338	-4905	-4772	-6034	- <b>4649</b>	-4931
Level 6	Prior	-67,612	-5231	-2083	-1390	-257	-827	-1567
	Likelihood	-18,118	-24,454	-25,696	-27,123	-40,108	-27,312	-26,111
	Posterior	-85,730	-29,685	-27,779	-28,513	-40,365	-28,139	- <b>27,678</b>

# More optimistic results about positive evidence

 Positive evidence can lead you to the correct answer out of all computations (Chater & Vitanyi, 2007).

ELSEVIEK Journal of Mathematical Psycho	logy 51 (2007) 135-163	www.elsevier.com/locate/jmp
'Ideal learning' of natural lan learning from p	iguage: Positive re ositive evidence	sults about
Nick Chater <sup>a,*</sup>	, Paul Vitányi <sup>b</sup>	
<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Universi <sup>b</sup> Centrum roor Wiskunde en Inform	ty College, London WCIE 6BT, UK	
Received 25 November 2005; receive Available online 2	d in revised form 5 September 2006 6 December 2006	
Gold's [1967. Language identification in the limit. Information and en taken, by many cognitive scientists, to have powerful negative unces of nucleon to linguistic impul). This provides one, of sever vares of information, including immit complexitations on learning. We obtained Tanguage acquisition. The Simphetty Principle chooses th bothmore that and a sequestive the strength of the strength of the iter work assumptions, in upparent contrast to results on language memory for reconsidering the learnability of various speets of nu theoretical debatic in research on language acquisition and lingui 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.	I Control, 16, 447–474] celebrated mplications for the learnability of al, lines of argument that language 2 consider an "ideal learner" that ap 6 hypothesis that provides the brief licity Principle allows learning fr. 6 elarnability in the limit (e.g., Go tutural language from positive evide sities.	work on learning in the limit has language from positive data (i.e. acquisition must draw on othe plies a Simplicity Principle to the sit representation of the available m positive evidence alone, giver d, 1967). These results provide a nece, which has been at the center ormal languages
	mogorov; Identification in the limit; F	

How can the poverty of the stimulus argument be language is inherently open-ended; and our present under

standing both of the mechanisms of human learning

At an abstract level, a natural approach is to

Human grammar judgments vs. learnability predictions Δ fallarrive 3.5 disablear Relative ungrammaticality × pour 3 suggestvanish × is donate 2.5 × gonna create 2 who whispenhat is 1.5 × that 1 × wanna 0.5 2 -2 -10 -8 -6 -4 0 4 Learnability: log(1/years needed) Hsu, Chater, Vitanyi (2011)



#### R. J. Solomonoff

1. 8

Rockford Research Institute, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts

been taken, by many cognitive scientists, to ha from mere exposure to linguistic input). This sources of information, including innate const problem of language acquisition. The Simplicit data-here, the data are the linguistic input t quite weak assumptions, in apparent contrast framework for reconsidering the learnability o of theoretical debate in research on language © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Learnability; Language acquisition; Algo

#### 1. Introduction

Language acquisition involves the r linguistic structure of astonishing comple input that appears noisy and partial. H impoverished stimulus support such imp One influential line of argument is that "poverty of the stimulus" argument (Cl typically used to argue that language acq by innate knowledge of language, often t grammar," that the child brings to bear problem (e.g., Chomsky, 1965, 1980; Ho 1988). This type of argument for univers central importance for the study of hum language acquisition (e.g., Crain & Lil Hornstein & Lightfoot, 1981).

How can the poverty of the stimul assessed? At an abstract level, a natura

In Part I, four ostensibly diffe are presented, in which the proble very long sequence of symbols-p mation to be used in the inducti induction can be put in this form.

Some strong heuristic argument lence of the last three models. O Bayes formulation, in which a p quences of symbols on the basis Turing machine that are required output.

Though it seems likely, it is no models is equivalent to the other Few rigorous results are presen of the properties of these models sistency and meaningfulness, of exact nature of the Turing machine predictions in comparison to those In Part II these models are appl

\* This research was supported by A tract No. AF 49(638)-376, Grant No. Al NIH Grant No. GM 11021-01.

† A paper given at the Conference held at the California Institute of subject of Zator Technical Bulletin 3.1 to 3.4 first appeared in Zator Tec 1960 and January 1961, respectively. tations of Zator Technical Bulletins respectively.

## **Marcus Hutter**

<u>16 12 93 94 95 96 ...</u>

## Universal **Artificial Intelligence**

**Sequential Decisions Based on Algorithmic Probability** 

D Springer

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### THREE MODELS FOR THE DESCRIPTION OF LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

We investigate several conceptions of linguistic structure to determine whether or not they can provide simple and "revealing" grammars that generate all of the sentences of English and only these. We find that no finite-state Markov process that produces symbols with transition from state to state can serve as an English grammar. Furthermore, the particular subclass of such processes that produce n-order statistical approximations to English do not come closer, with increasing n, to matching the output of an English grammar. We formalize the notions of "phrase structure" and show that this gives us a method for describing language which is essentially more powerful, though still representable as a rather elementary type of finite-state process. Nevertheless, it is successful only when limited to a small subset of simple sentences. We study the formal properties of a set of grammatical transformations that carry sentences with phrase structure into new sentences with derived phrase structure, showing that transformational grammars are processes of the same elementary type as phrase-structure grammars; that the grammar of English is materially simplified if phrase structure description is limited to a kernel of simple sentences from which all other sentences are constructed by repeated transformations; and that this view of linguistic structure gives a certain insight into the use and understanding of language.

### 1. Introduction

There are two central problems in the descriptive study of language. One primary concern of the linguist is to discover simple and "revealing" grammars for natural languages. At the same time, by studying the properties of such successful grammars and clarifying the basic conceptions that underlie them, he hopes to arrive at a general theory of linguistic structure. We shall examine certain features of these related inouries.

The grammar of a language can be viewed as a theory of the structure of this language. Any scientific theory is based on a certain finite set of observations and, by establishing general laws stated in terms of certain hypothetical constructs, it attempts to account for these

\*This work was supported in part by the Army (Signal Corps), the Air Force (Office of Scientific Research, Air Research and Development Command), and the Navy (Office of Naval Research), and in part by a grant from Eastman Kodak Company. observations, to show how they are interrelated, and to predict an indefinite number of new phenomena. A mathematical theory has the additional property that predictions follow rigorously from the body of theory. Similarly, a grammar is based on a finite number of observed sentences (the linguist's corpus) and it "projects" this set to an infinite set of grammatical sentences by establishing general "laws" (grammatical rules) framed in terms of such hypothetical constructs as the particular phonemes, words, phrases, and so on, of the language under analysis. A properly formulated grammar should determine unambiguously the set of grammatical sentences.

General linguistic theory can be viewed as a metatheory which is concerned with the problem of how to choose such a grammar in the case of each particular language on the basis of a finite corpus of sentences. In particular, it will consider and attempt to explicate the relation between the set of grammatical sentences and the set of observed sentences. In other words, linguistic theory attempts to explain the ability of a speaker to produce and understand new sentences, and to reject as ungrammatical other new sequences, on the basis of his limited linguistic experience.

Suppose that for many languages there are certain clear cases of grammatical sentences and certain clear cases of ungrammatical sequences, e.g., (1) and (2), respectively, in English.

(1) John ate a sandwich

In this case, we can test the adequacy of a proposed linguistic theory by determining, for each language, whether or not the clear cases are handled properly by the grammars constructed in accordance with this theory. For example, if a large corpus of English does not happen to contain either (1) or (2), we ask whether the grammar that is determined for this corpus will project the corpus to include (1) and exclude (2). Even though such clear cases may provide only a weak test of adequacy for the grammar of a given language taken in isolation, they provide a very strong test for any general linguistic theory and for the set of grammars to which it leads, since we insist that in the case of each language the clear cases be handled properly in a fixed and predetermined manner. We can take certain steps towards the construction of an operational characterization of "grammatical sentence" that will provide us with the clear cases required to set the task of linguistics significantly.

<sup>(2)</sup> Sandwich a ate John.

# Formal and natural languages

- Patterns in natural language correspond to different formal languages & require distinct computational resources (see Jäger & Rogers 2012)
  - a<sup>n</sup> {a,aa,aaa,aaaa,....} The <u>tall</u>, <u>angry</u>, <u>young</u>, giraffe ...
  - (ab)<sup>n</sup> {ab, abab, ababab, ...}
     Bring two boats, three cups, six accordions, ...
  - a<sup>n</sup>b<sup>n</sup> {ab, aabb, aaabbb, ...}
     <u>If If</u> Ted cried <u>then</u> John was sad <u>then</u> John is empathetic.
  - **w w** {abcabc, accbaaccba, bbbb, ...}
  - **a**<sup>n</sup>**b**<sup>m</sup>**c**<sup>n</sup>**d**<sup>m</sup> {abcd, abbcdd, aabccd, ...}



• These examples face all the problems we started with – subset problem, infinite productivity, gold non-learnability, etc.

# **Working hypothesis**

- Learning operates over a Turing-complete space
  - Learning is like programming learners combine existing operations in new ways to form generative models of data
  - More input data drives revision, improvement of programs, justifying additional complexity.



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## **Cartoon of learning setup**



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# Learning generative programs can be fast and easy



(approximat ed on top strings)

# The model builds distinct generative models



# Learning generative programs can be fast and easy



























Reber



## Morgan & Newport

 $S \rightarrow AP BP (CP)$   $AP \rightarrow a (D)$   $BP \rightarrow CP f \mid e$  $CP \rightarrow c (g)$ 

## Morgan, Meier, & Newport

$$S \rightarrow AP BP (CP)$$
$$AP \rightarrow o \ a \ (d)$$
$$BP \rightarrow a \ CP \ f \mid u \ e$$
$$CP \rightarrow i \ c \ (g).$$



Reber





## Moving toward natural language

• Let's give the learning model data from a LING-101 CFG, including a few kinds of structures – linear dependencies, tail recursion in AP, recursion in S, PP, etc.

$$S \rightarrow NPVP$$
  
 $NP \rightarrow n \mid d \mid n \mid d \mid AP \mid NP \mid PP$   
 $AP \rightarrow a \mid a \mid AP$   
 $VP \rightarrow v \mid v \mid NP \mid v \mid S \mid VP \mid PP$   
 $PP \rightarrow p \mid NP$ 





Sentence (not observed in data)

# Learning is *much* more powerful than POS has claimed

- Hierarchical structure (Perfors, Tenenbaum & Regier 2011)
- Language identification (Chater & Vitanyi 2007, Yang & Piantadosi 2022)
- Phonology textbook problems (Ellis 2020)
- Compositional semantics (Kwiatkowski et al. 2010)
- Island constraints (Wilcox, Futrell, Levy 2021)
- Linguistic features, structural generalizations (Warstadt et al. 2020, Warstadt & Bowman 2020)
- Binding theory / c-command (programs on trees) (Gorensten & Piantadosi, in prep)

## **Modeling summary**

- Idealized learners can <u>construct</u> computational devices to generate key structures in natural language.
- Children don't <u>need</u> language-specific representations or biases to solve the learnability problem (though other evidence might make us think those are real)
- Complex, structured generalizations, infinite productivity, fast learning of latent generative processes – all are natural tendencies of learning systems that work over computations.

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# #1 – Formal language experiments





















# **Working hypothesis**

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## #3 – Program induction in child learners



Ben Pitt



## #3 – Program induction in child learners



# Thank you

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**Code is all available** in our lab's program induction library, Fleet: https://github.com/piantado/Fleet/

