LAD Conferences

Laboratoire de recherche sur les asymétries d'interfaces

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A Martian View of Grammar

What would a Martin scientist, observing language from afar, conclude about the creative capacity of the human grammar? In more earthly terms, how do we characterize the "infinite use of finite means" on the basis of a linguistic sample, especially when other means of investigation is not available? A most obvious challenge comes from young children still in the process of language acquisition: in many studies, a relative small sample of their speech is the only data at hand. Indeed, children's limited vocabularies and small arsenal of linguistic combinations have often been characterized as item/usage-based, reflecting the role of rote memorization.
In this talk, we develop a quantitative method, one which a Martian observer might put into use, to evaluate the scope of grammatical productivity. Even very young children's language shows statistical properties of a fully productive grammar; the role of item/usage/lexical base learning has been greatly exaggerated.

Charles Yang received his Ph.D. in Computer Science from MIT in 2000. Before his appointment at Penn, he taught linguistics and psychology at Yale University. His research and teaching interests include, language acquisition and change; morphology and the mental lexicon; computational linguistics; and the evolution of language and cognition. Most recently, he authored the book *Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World.*

Recent Publications:

Yang, C. (2010) **Computational models of language learning**. *WIREs Cognitive Science*.
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