

Invited Plenary Panel
Salon 6
Friday, 8 January, 7:30 – 9:00 PM

The Connections between Language Contact and Language Acquisition

Elissa Newport (Georgetown University)
Don Winford (The Ohio State University)
Charles Yang (University of Pennsylvania)

The LSA Program Committee has assembled an invited plenary panel focusing on the connections between language contact and language acquisition. Scholars in these two areas tend to work in isolation from each other, and this panel aims to create a platform where the connections between the two sub-fields can be carefully examined and, hopefully, enhanced.

This overall objective guided the selection of panelists Charles Yang, Elissa Newport and Don Winford. All three scholars study acquisition and all three are interested in language contact and language change.

Charles Yang (University of Pennsylvania) specializes in language acquisition, processing, and change using computational methods and corpus statistics. He has developed a model of grammar competition in syntax that is relevant to both children's and adults' syntax, language contact and language change.

Elissa Newport (Georgetown University) studies language acquisition, including creolization, using miniature languages that allow her to control both the input and the structure of the language that her participants learn. With co-author Hudson Kam (2005; 2009), she tested the acquisition of the miniature languages both by children and adult learners, in an attempt to determine who the best "regularizers" are (between children and adults) and the most effective agents of creolization. She also studies maturational effects on language learning by comparing children to adults as first and second language learners.

Don Winford (The Ohio State University) is a contact linguist who studies how source languages compete with each other in the emergence of a creole language. He studies the range of contact effects that are detectable in the newly emerged linguistic system, including the role of second language acquisition. One of his most recent projects examines the Gbe influence on the morpho-syntactic properties of Surinamese creoles. He uses psycholinguistic approaches to language contact phenomena, using Van Coetsem's model of language contact as a basic theoretical framework.

Abstracts

Elissa L. Newport (Georgetown University)
Statistical learning and language change in children and adults

In recent years a number of problems in the brain and cognitive sciences have been addressed through statistical approaches, hypothesizing that humans and animals learn or adapt to their perceptual environments by tuning themselves to the statistics of incoming stimulation. Our own work on statistical language learning shows that infants, young children, and adults can compute, online and with remarkable speed, how consistently sounds co-occur, how frequently words occur in similar contexts, and the like, and can utilize these statistics to find candidate words in a speech stream, discover grammatical categories, and acquire simple syntactic structure in miniature languages.

However, statistical learning is not merely learning the patterns that are presented in the input. Children exposed to inconsistent linguistic input will sharpen and regularize the statistics of inconsistently used constructions, producing a more systematic language than the one to which they are exposed. In contrast, adults exposed to inconsistent input reproduce the inconsistencies to which they are exposed. We have found these outcomes in naturalistic studies of deaf children whose parents are late learners and produce inconsistent usages in ASL, and also in laboratory studies of miniature language learning, where we can precisely control linguistic input. Our most recent work examines inconsistent variation in relation to linguistic universals. When we present learners with inconsistencies that violate universal or common tendencies of natural languages, learners shift the languages toward greater conformity with such universals; and children do this much more strongly than adults.

Invited Plenary Panel
Salon 6
Friday, 8 January, 7:30 – 9:00 PM

We believe that these phenomena may shed light on how young languages are formed and how systematic language structures can emerge in communities where usages are varied and inconsistent. Our results suggest that children can contribute to the emergence of grammatical structure, and also suggest how children learning spoken and signed languages may overcome errorful input, as long as they receive language exposure early in life.

Don Winford (The Ohio State University)

Links between creole formation and second language acquisition

The links between processes of creole formation and second language acquisition (SLA) have been explored from a variety of perspectives, focusing on the role played by the linguistic inputs from both the putative target language and learners' L1s, and on the processes of restructuring involved. With regard to the latter, most current research views creole formation as a product of three interrelated processes, which are shared to varying degrees with SLA: reduction in the input from the TL or superstrate; L1 influence via the mechanism of "transfer"; and creative internal processes such as grammaticalization. With regard to the first two, there is strong evidence that the early stages of creole formation and SLA share processes of simplification and other kinds of restructuring, to the point that "the early L2 learner and the early creole co-creator are cognitively and epistemologically indistinguishable" (Sprouse 2006). Additionally, much recent research has shown that transfer from learners' L1s can occur as a compensatory strategy in second language use, even in the classroom (Helms-Park 2003; Siegel 2008). Similarly, there ample evidence of the role of transfer in naturalistic SLA (Sanchez 2006), and this includes the robust literature on the role of L1 influence in the development of indigenized Englishes (Siegel 2008). At the same time, SLA researchers and creolists have come to a consensus that L1 transfer plays a role in both SLA and creole formation (Lefebvre et al 2006).

I argue here that a language processing approach can shed further light on the connections between the two types of acquisition. There are two aspects of SLA and creole formation that can be profitably explained in terms of processing constraints. One has to do with so-called "simplification" processes such as loss of inflectional morphology, regularization of word order in declarative, interrogative and negative sentences, etc, all of which are typical of the early stages of SLA. Plag (2008a,b) has employed Pienemann's (1998) Processability Theory to provide an account of how a processing model of SLA can explain such phenomena. The second aspect of acquisition that lends itself to treatment in terms of language processing (particularly production), is the way structural features are transferred from learners' L1s into a developing IL or creole. There is potential for such transfer at practically every stage of the language production process, from conceptualization to grammatical encoding, to phonological encoding (Winford 2013). I suggest that there are significant differences between creole formation and IL development with regard to how L1 transfer operates at the levels of morphological and syntactic processing. Such differences, however, are more matters of degree than of kind. In cases of tutored SLA, learners typically inhibit transfer from their L1s since it affects successful acquisition as well as communication. But in cases of natural SLA, and especially creole formation, such transfer is generally more prominent. The chief motivation for this is the lack of access to the superstrate grammar, amplified in creole formation by the fact that only pidginized or simplified second language varieties of the superstrate act as targets of learning for creole creators, at least in cases of "radical" creole formation. This means they have limited access to the grammatical encoding procedures of the superstrate, and have to fall back on those of their L1s in order to create a viable language of communication.

Exploration of these links between creole formation and SLA promises to reveal further insight into some of the common questions shared by the two fields of research, including the role of input and how learners interpret and use it as intake; the role of learners' L1s; and the creativity of the restructuring process and the principles that guide it.

Charles Yang (University of Pennsylvania)

The natural selection of dialects

The parallels between historical linguistics and biological evolution have been recognized since Charles Darwin. Like evolution, language change can be viewed as competition between variants with differential propensities in transmission. The mechanisms of language acquisition can be projected over multiple generations to obtain a model of language change, which leads to a new conception of "functional load" in language. We show that the outcome of phonemic changes in language/dialect contact situations can be quantitatively predicted. The model is confirmed in several documented cases of vowel mergers, including the spread of the "cot-caught" merger at dialect boundaries of American English.