



香港中文大學
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

The development and evolution of grammar

Date: October 15, 2013 (Tuesday)

Time: 16:30 – 18:15

Venue: LSK LT1 (Lee Shau Kee Building), The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Abstract

The hallmark of language is the combinatorial use of rules, but this may not be evident in the early stage of child development. Very young children's language shows only limited degree of combinatorial diversity (Tomasello 2003), which bears similarities to the imitation based signs by primates such as Nim Chimsky (Terrace 1979). Indeed, many accounts of language evolution build on the perceived continuity between the ontogeny and phylogeny of language (Bickerton 1996, Hurford 2011).

It is worth noting that low combinatorial diversities in child language, the central piece of evidence for usage based theories of language, have never been shown to be inconsistent with a compositional view of grammar. In this work, we present a statistically rigorous demonstration that child language is based on abstract rules rather than the storage and retrieval of item-based expressions. Using the usage profiles of noun phrases, we show that young children's syntactic diversity is statistically indistinguishable from the expectation of a fully compositional grammar once universal statistical laws of languages are taken into account. Furthermore, analysis of Nim Chimsky's production data shows that Nim's sign combinations fail to reach the expected level of diversity; rather, they appear to bear hallmarks of memory and retrieval of holistic forms (Tomasello 2003).

Speaker

Professor Charles Yang is currently Associate Professor of Linguistics and Computer Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He has researched extensively on domain-general and domain-specific mechanisms in language acquisition using computational modeling, and on mathematical models of language variation and change. Professor Yang is the author of *Knowledge and learning in natural language* (2002), *The Infinite gift: How children learn and unlearn languages* (2006) and editor of *Language acquisition: Critical concepts in linguistics* (2010).

ALL ARE WELCOME

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