

Unruly grammars

Ewa Dąbrowska

Northumbria University, UK

A successful cognitive theory of grammar must be able to explain how speakers are able to produce and understand novel messages, how children learn language, and how speakers (child and adult) process language in real time. Much of modern linguistic theorising has focussed on the first of these questions, and the traditional answer has been that that productivity relies on abstract rules or schemas. It is widely acknowledged that speakers also have access to large repertoire of multi-word chunks – formulaic phrases such as *I don't believe a word of it* and frames with slots such as *Would you mind VP-ing?* or *I'm fed up with NP*, which also allow a certain amount of productivity since novel material can be inserted into the slot. However, this “holistic” mode is generally assumed to be a special mode of language use which complements the normal (i.e. analytic) processing route (Kuiper 1996, Moon 1998, Sinclair 1991, Wray 1992).

On the other hand, lexically specific units of this kind are known to play a central role in language acquisition. There is a considerable body of research suggesting that early usage is quite stereotypical, and that young children's grammatical knowledge is best described in terms of lexically specific units rather than general rules of the kind that are assumed to characterise adult knowledge (see e.g. Bannard and Lieven 2009; Dąbrowska 2000, 2004; Dąbrowska and Lieven 2005; Lieven et al. 2003, 2009; Tomasello 1992, 2000, 2003). As children grow older, their usage becomes more varied. This is believed to reflect the emergence of more general schemas, which are extracted by generalizing over more specific units: formulaic frames are learned by abstracting over specific utterances, and more abstract constructions are learned by abstracting over frames. Crucially, since schemas – both low-level and more general – have the same structure as their instantiations, the process of schema extraction involves the strengthening of commonalities and loss of detail rather than a translation into a different representational format (Dąbrowska 2004; Langacker 1987, 2000, 2010). Furthermore, since the lexical representations of relational words are essentially low-level schemas, the constructivist account of grammatical development need not postulate any learning mechanism beyond those which are known to be necessary for lexical learning.

The constructivist view, then, is that that young children build utterances by recycling and recombining previously encountered chunks of language. Could such mechanisms also account for adult production? I will argue that the types of representations and production mechanisms that have been postulated for children can also explain the *basic mode* of adult language use, i.e. informal conversation. Viewing adult language in such terms not only captures the continuity between child and adult usage, but also helps to explain how speakers are able to produce and understand language as fast as they do: using preconstructed chunks saves processing effort. Arguably, adults also have more abstract linguistic representations. These, however, are acquired relatively late in acquisition, largely as a result of experience with written texts, and may not be acquired by all speakers.

This view of language use raises some interesting questions. Different speakers have different developmental histories, and hence acquire different chunks. How then are they able to communicate? And if the units that are most relevant to ordinary language use are very specific

patterns centred around particular lexical items, why are there higher level regularities in language? In other words, why are languages as regular as they are? With respect to the first question, I suggest that speakers' developmental histories massively overdetermine the utterances that they produce and understand, in the sense that a particular utterance can typically be assembled in different ways from different chunks. The answer to the second question, I will argue, lies primarily in the functional pressures that influence usage frequency and the complex interplay between the dynamics of usage and individual mental grammars.

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