

Language Acquisition in the Past: A Mechanistic View of Language Change

Uncovers the processes underpinning language change by studying child language acquisition as it occurred in the past.

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Language Acquisition in the Past: A Mechanistic View of Language Change develops a framework for understanding when, why, and how child language acquisition drives language change. It unites a wide range of diachronic phenomena from phonology, morphology, and syntax under the processes of generalization learning during language acquisition. In combining insights from computational and quantitative modeling of language acquisition with insights from learners' response to variation in the input and the sociolinguistics of early peer interaction, its framework provides a means for distinguishing instances of child-driven from adult-driven change in historical settings where direct observation is no longer possible. This has implications for how we conceptualize types of language change: a single process may lie behind many disparate diachronic outcomes and vice-versa. Approaches to the study of change which center on processes or mechanisms over outcomes and effects stand to bring new clarity to a tangle of diachronic phenomena.

Historical linguistics; language change; child language acquisition; computational linguistics; variation and change; morphology; phonology; syntax

Key Features

- Demonstrates a central role for the process of language acquisition in driving language change
- Combines methods and insights from computational linguistics, child language acquisition, and sociolinguistics to solve intransigent problems in historical linguistics
- Introduces a methodology for modeling child language acquisition on historical data
- Provides a framework acquisition driven change which differentiates child- and adult-driven language change
- Presents case studies in Modern North American English phonology, Middle and Early Modern English syntax, Latin derivational morphology, and Proto-Germanic inflectional morphology
- Diachronic case studies have close parallels in attested language acquisition backed by large bodies of developmental, experimental, and computational research