

# Learning Grammatical Constructions in a Miniature Language from Narrated Video Events

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## Abstract

The objective of this research is to develop a system for miniature language learning based on a minimum of pre-wired language-specific functionality, that is compatible with observations of perceptual and language capabilities in human development. In the proposed system, meaning is extracted from video images based on detection of physical contact and its parameters. Mapping of sentence form to meaning is performed by learning grammatical constructions that are retrieved from a construction inventory based on the constellation of closed class items uniquely identifying the target sentence structure. The resulting system displays robust acquisition behavior that reproduces certain observations from developmental studies, with very modest "innate" language specificity.

## Introduction

Feldman et al. (1990) posed the problem of "miniature" language acquisition based on <sentence, image> pairs as a "touchstone" for cognitive science. In this task, an artificial system is confronted with a reduced version of the problem of language acquisition faced by the child, that involves both the extraction of meaning from the image, and the mapping of the paired sentence onto this meaning.

## Extraction of Meaning

In this developmental context, Mandler (1999) suggested that the infant begins to construct meaning from the scene based on the extraction of perceptual primitives. From simple representations such as contact, support, attachment (Talmy 1988) the infant could construct progressively more elaborate representations of visuospatial meaning. Thus, the physical event "collision" is a form of the perceptual primitive "contact". Kotovsky & Baillargeon (1998) observed that at 6 months, infants demonstrate sensitivity to the parameters of objects involved in a collision, and the resulting effect on the collision, suggesting indeed that infants can represent contact as an event predicate with agent and patient arguments.

Siskind (2001) has demonstrated that force dynamic primitives of contact, support, attachment can be extracted from video event sequences and used to

recognize events including pick-up, put-down, and stack based on their characterization in an event logic. The use of these intermediate representations renders the system robust to variability in motion and view parameters. Most importantly, Siskind demonstrated that the lexical semantics for a number of verbs could be established by automatic image processing.

## Sentence to meaning mapping:

Once meaning is extracted from the scene, the significant problem of mapping sentences to meanings remains. The nativist perspective on this problem holds that the <sentence, meaning> data to which the child is exposed is highly indeterminate, and underspecifies the mapping to be learned. This "poverty of the stimulus" is a central argument for the existence of a genetically specified universal grammar, such that language acquisition consists of configuring the UG for the appropriate target language (Chomsky 1995). In this framework, once a given parameter is set, its use should apply to new constructions in a generalized, generative manner.

An alternative functionalist perspective holds that learning plays a much more central role in language acquisition. The infant develops an inventory of grammatical constructions as mappings from form to meaning (Goldberg 1995). These constructions are initially rather fixed and specific, and later become generalized into a more abstract compositional form employed by the adult (Tomasello 1999). In this context, construction of the relation between perceptual and cognitive representations and grammatical form plays a central role in learning language (e.g. Feldman et al. 1990, 1996; Langacker 1991; Mandler 1999; Talmy 1998).

These issues of learnability and innateness have provided a rich motivation for simulation studies that have taken a number of different forms. Elman (1990) demonstrated that recurrent networks are sensitive to predictable structure in grammatical sequences. Subsequent studies of grammar induction demonstrate how syntactic structure can be recovered from sentences (e.g. Stolcke & Omohundro 1994). From the "grounding of language in meaning" perspective (e.g.

Feldman et al. 1990, 1996; Langacker 1991; Goldberg 1995), Chang & Maia (2001) exploited the relations between action representation and simple verb frames in a construction grammar approach, and Cottrell et al. (1990) associated sequences of words with simple image sequences. In effort to consider more complex grammatical forms, Miikkulainen (1996) demonstrated a system that learned the mapping between relative phrase constructions and multiple event representations, based on the use of a stack for maintaining state information during the processing of the next embedded clause in a recursive manner.

In a more generalized approach, Dominey (2000) exploited the regularity that sentence to meaning mapping is encoded in all languages by word order and grammatical marking (bound or free) (Bates et al. 1982). That model was based on the functional neurophysiology of cognitive sequence and language processing and an associated neural network model that has been demonstrated to simulate interesting aspects of infant (Dominey & Ramus 2000) and adult language processing (Dominey et al. 2003).

## Objectives

The goals of the current study are fourfold: First to test the hypothesis that meaning can be extracted from visual scenes based on the detection of contact and its parameters in an approach similar to but significantly simplified from Siskind (2001); Second to determine whether the model of Dominey (2000) can be extended to handle embedded relative clauses; Third to demonstrate that these two systems can be combined to perform miniature language acquisition; and finally to demonstrate that the combined system can provide insight into the developmental progression in human language acquisition without the necessity of a pre-wired parameterized grammar system (Chomsky 1995).

## The Training Data

The human experimenter enacts and simultaneously narrates visual scenes made up of events that occur between a red cylinder, a green block and a blue semicircle or “moon” on a black matte table surface. A video camera above the surface provides a video image that is processed by a color-based recognition and tracking system (Smart – Panlab, Barcelona Spain) that generates a time ordered sequence of the contacts that occur between objects that is subsequently processed for event analysis (below). The simultaneous narration of the ongoing events is processed by a commercial speech-to-text system (IBM ViaVoice<sup>TM</sup>). Speech and

vision data were acquired and then processed off-line yielding a data set of matched sentence – scene pairs that were provided as input to the structure mapping model. A total of ~300 <sentence, scene> pairs were tested in the following experiments.

## Visual Scenes and analysis

For a given video sequence the visual scene analysis generates the corresponding event description in the format *event(agent, object, recipient)*.

### Single Event Labeling

Events are defined in terms of contacts between elements. A contact is defined in terms of the time at which it occurred, the agent, object, and duration of the contact. The agent is determined as the element that had a larger relative velocity towards the other element involved in the contact. Based on these parameters of contact, scene events are recognized as follows:

**Touch(agent, object):** A single contact, in which (a) the duration of the contact is inferior to *touch\_duration* (1.5 seconds), and (b) the *object* is not displaced during the duration of the contact.

**Push(agent, object):** Similar to touch, with a greater contact duration, superior or equal to *touch\_duration* and inferior to *take\_duration* (5 sec), and object displacement.

**Take(agent, object):** A single contact in which (a) the duration of contact is superior or equal to *take\_duration*, (b) the object is displaced during the contact, and (c) the agent and object remain in contact.

**Take(agent, object, source):** Multiple contacts, as the agent takes the object from the source. Same as Take(a,o), and for the optional second contact between agent and source (a) the duration of the contact is inferior to *take\_duration*, and (b) the agent and source do not remain in contact. Finally, contact between the object and source is broken during the event.

**Give(agent, object, recipient):** Multiple contacts as agent takes object, then initiates contact between object and recipient.

These event labeling templates form the basis for a template matching algorithm that labels events based on the contact list, similar to the spanning interval and event logic of Siskind (2001).

**Complex “Hierarchical” Events:** The events described above are simple in the sense that there have no hierarchical structure. This imposes serious limitations on the syntactic complexity of the corresponding sentences (Feldman et al. 1996, Miikkulainen 1996). The sentence “The block that pushed the moon was touched by the triangle” illustrates a complex event that exemplifies this issue.

The corresponding compound event will be recognized and represented as a pair of temporally successive simple event descriptions, in this case: *push(block, moon)*, and *touch(triangle, block)*. The “block” serves as the link that connects these two simple events in order to form a complex hierarchical event.

### Structure mapping for language learning

Our approach is based on the cross-linguistic observation that open class words (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) are assigned to their thematic roles based on word order and/or grammatical function words or morphemes (Bates et al. 1982). The mapping of sentence form onto meaning (Goldberg 1995) takes place at two distinct levels: Words are associated with individual components of event descriptions, and grammatical structure is associated with functional roles within scene events (Fig 1). The first level has been addressed by Siskind (1996), Roy & Pentland (2000) and Steels (2001) and we treat it here in a relatively simple but effective manner. Our principle interest lies more in the second level of mapping between scene and sentence structure.

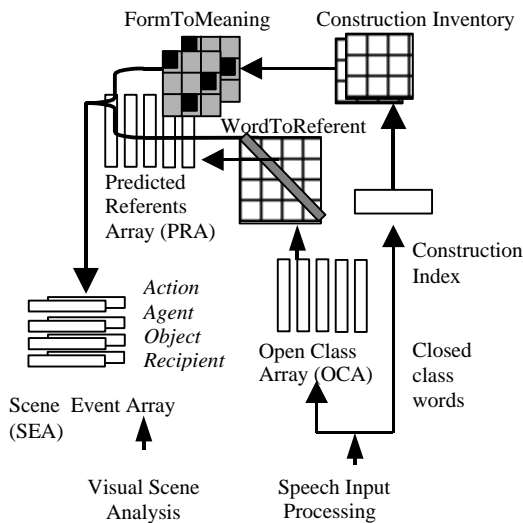


Figure 1. Structure-Mapping Architecture.

**Model Overview:** Words in sentences, and elements in the scene are coded as single ON bits in respective 25-element vectors. On input, Open class words populate the Open Class Array (OCA), and closed class words populate the Construction index. Visual Scene Analysis populates the Scene Event Array (SEA) with the extracted meaning as scene elements. Words in OCA are translated to Predicted Referents via the WordToReferent mapping to populate the Predicted

Referents Array (PRA). PRA elements are mapped onto their roles in the Scene Event Array (SEA) by the FormToMeaning mapping, specific to each sentence type. This mapping is retrieved from Construction Inventory, via the ConstructionIndex that encodes the closed class words that characterize each sentence type.

### Word Meaning

In the initial learning phases there is no influence of syntactic knowledge and the word-referent associations are stored in the WordToReferent matrix (Eqn 1) by associating every word with every referent in the current scene ( $\alpha=1$ ), exploiting the cross-situational regularity (Siskind 1996) that a given word will have a higher coincidence with referent to which it refers than with other referents. This initial word learning contributes to learning the mapping between sentence and scene structure (Eqn. 4, 5 & 6 below). Then, knowledge of the syntactic structure, encoded in FormToMeaning can be used to identify the appropriate referent (in the SEA) for a given word (in the OCA), corresponding to a zero value of  $\alpha$  in Eqn. 1. In this “syntactic bootstrapping” for the new word “gugle,” for example, syntactic knowledge of Agent-Event-Object structure of the sentence “John pushed the gugle” can be used to assign “gugle” to the object of push.

$$\text{WordToReferent}(i,j) = \text{WordToReferent}(i,j) + \text{OCA}(k,i) * \text{SEA}(m,j) * \text{Max}(\alpha, \text{FormToMeaning}(m,k)) \quad (1)$$

Indices:  $k(1:6)$  - words;  $m(1:6)$  - scene elements;  $i(1:25)$ ,  $j(1:25)$  - elements in word and scene item vectors, respectively.

### Open vs Closed Class Word Categories

Newborn infants are sensitive to the perceptual properties that distinguish these two categories (Shi et al. 1999), and in adults, these categories are processed by dissociable neurophysiological systems (Brown et al. 1999). Similarly, artificial neural networks can also learn to make this function/content distinction (Morgan et al. 1996, Blanc et al. 2003). Thus, for the speech input that is provided to the learning model open and closed class words are directed to separate processing streams that preserve their order and identity, as indicated in Figure 1.

### Mapping Sentence to Meaning

In terms of the architecture in Figure 1, this mapping can be characterized in the following successive steps. First, words in the Open Class Array are decoded into their corresponding scene referents (via the

WordToReferent mapping) to yield the Predicted Referents Array that contains the translated words while preserving their original order from the OCA (Eqn 2).

$$\text{PRA}(m,j) = \sum_{i=1}^n \text{OCA}(m,i) * \text{WordToReferent}(i,j) \quad (2)$$

Next, each sentence type will correspond to a specific *form to meaning* mapping between the PRA and the SEA. encoded in the FormToMeaning array. The problem will be to retrieve for each sentence type, the appropriate corresponding FormToMeaning mapping. To solve this problem, we recall that each sentence type will have a unique constellation of closed class words and/or bound morphemes (Bates et al. 1982) that can be coded in a ConstructionIndex (Eqn.3) that forms a unique identifier for each sentence type, shifting the current contents by the index of the ON bit in FunctionWord, then ANDing the FunctionWord vector. The appropriate FormToMeaning mapping for each sentence type can be indexed in ConstructionInventory by its corresponding ConstructionIndex.

$$\text{ConstructionIndex} = f_{\text{circularShift}}(\text{ConstructionIndex}, \text{FunctionWord}) \quad (3)$$

The link between the ConstructionIndex and the corresponding FormToMeaning mapping is established as follows. As each new sentence is processed, we first reconstruct the specific FormToMeaning mapping for that sentence (Eqn 4), by mapping words to referents (in PRA) and referents to scene elements (in SEA). The resulting, FormToMeaningCurrent encodes the correspondence between word order (that is preserved in the PRA Eqn 2) and thematic roles in the SEA. Note that the quality of FormToMeaningCurrent will depend on the quality of acquired word meanings in WordToReferent. Thus, syntactic learning requires a minimum baseline of semantic knowledge. Given the FormToMeaningCurrent mapping for the current sentence, we can now associate it in the ConstructionInventory with the corresponding function word configuration or ConstructionIndex for that sentence, expressed in (Eqn 5). In Eqns 5, 6 FormToMeaning is linearized for simplification.

$$\text{FormToMeaningCurrent}(m,k) = \sum_{i=1}^n \text{PRA}(k,i) * \text{SEA}(m,i) \quad (4)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{ConstructionInventory}(i,j) &= \text{ConstructionInventory}(i,j) \\ &+ \text{ConstructionIndex}(i) \\ &* \text{FormToMeaningCurrent}(j) \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

Finally, once this learning has occurred, for new sentences we can now extract the FormToMeaning mapping from the learned ConstructionInventory by using the ConstructionIndex as an index into this associative memory, illustrated in Eqn. 6.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{FormToMeaning}(i) &= \\ \sum_{j=1}^n \text{ConstructionInventory}(i,j) * \text{ConstructinIndex}(j) \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

To accommodate the dual scenes for complex events Eqns. 4-7 are instantiated twice each, to represent the two components of the dual scene. In the case of simple scenes, the second component of the dual scene representation is null.

We evaluate performance by using the WordToReferent and FormToMeaning knowledge to construct for a given input sentence the “predicted scene”. That is, the model will construct an internal representation of the scene that should correspond to the input sentence. This is achieved by first converting the Open-Class-Array into its corresponding scene items in the Predicted-Referents-Array as specified in Eqn. 2. The referents are then re-ordered into the proper scene representation via application of the FormToMeaning transformation as described in Eqn. 7.

$$\text{PSA}(m,i) = \text{PRA}(k,i) * \text{FormToMeaning}(m,k) \quad (7)$$

When learning has proceeded correctly, the predicted scene array (PSA) contents should match those of the scene event array (SEA) that is directly derived from input to the model. We then quantify performance error in terms of the number of mismatches between PSA and SEA.

## Experimental results

Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (1996) indicate that children use knowledge of word meaning to acquire a fixed SVO template around 18 months, then expand this to non-canonical sentence forms around 24+ months. Tomasello (1999) indicates that fixed grammatical constructions will be used initially, and that these will then provide the basis for the development of more generalized constructions (Goldberg 1995). The following experiments attempt to follow this type of developmental progression. Training results in changes in the associative WordToReferent mappings encoding the lexicon, and changes in the ConstructionInventory encoding the form to meaning mappings, indexed by the ConstructionIndex.

## A. Learning of Active Forms for Simple Events

1. Active: The block pushed the triangle.
2. Dative: The block gave the triangle to the moon.

For this experiment, 17 scene/sentence pairs were generated that employed the 5 different events, and narrations in the active voice, corresponding to the grammatical forms 1 and 2. The model was trained for 32 passes through the 17 scene/sentence pairs for a total of 544 scene/sentence pairs. During the first 200 scene/sentence pair trials,  $\alpha$  in Eqn. 1 was 1 (i.e. no syntactic bootstrapping before syntax is acquired), and thereafter it was 0. This was necessary in order to avoid the random effect of syntactic knowledge on semantic learning in the initial learning stages. The trained system displayed error free performance for all 17 sentences, and generalization to new sentences that had not previously been tested.

## B. Passive forms

This experiment examined learning active and passive grammatical forms, employing grammatical forms 1-4. Word meanings were used from Experiment A, so only the structural FormToMeaning mappings were learned.

3. Passive: The triangle was pushed by the block.
4. Dative Passive: The moon was given to the triangle by the block.

Seventeen new scene/sentence pairs were generated with active and passive grammatical forms for the narration. Within 3 training passes through the 17 sentences (51 scene/sentence pairs), error free performance was achieved, with confirmation of error free generalization to new untrained sentences of these types. The rapid learning indicates the importance of lexicon in establishing the form to meaning mapping for the grammatical constructions.

## C. Relative forms for Complex Events

Here we consider complex scenes narrated by relative clause sentences. Eleven complex scene/sentence pairs were generated with narration corresponding to the grammatical forms indicated in 5 – 10:

5. The block that pushed the triangle touched the moon.
6. The block pushed the triangle that touched the moon.
7. The block that pushed the triangle was touched by the moon.

8. The block pushed the triangle that was touched the moon.
9. The block that was pushed by the triangle touched the moon.
10. The block was pushed by the triangle that touched the moon.

After presentation of 88 scene/sentence pairs, the model performed without error for these 6 grammatical forms, and displayed error-free generalization to new sentences that had not been used during the training for all six grammatical forms.

## D. Combined Test with and Without Lexicon

A total of 27 scene/sentence pairs, used in Experiments B and C, were employed that exercised the ensemble of grammatical forms 1 – 10 using the learned WordToReferent mappings. After exposure to 162 scene/sentence pairs the model performed and generalized without error. When this combined test was performed without the pre-learned lexical mappings in WordToReferent, the system failed to converge, illustrating the advantage of following the developmental progression from lexicon to simple to complex grammatical structure.

## E. Some Scaling Issues

A small lexicon ( $n < 25$ ) and construction inventory ( $n = 10$ ) are used, as the objective was to demonstrate the integrated system and grammatical structure learning capability. Based on the independent word and construction representations, and their synergistic interaction, the architecture scales well. The model is being tested with a larger lexicon, and has learned over 40 grammatical constructions. Importantly, the system should extend to all languages in which sentence to meaning mapping is encoded by word order and/or grammatical marking (Bates et al. 1982). In the current study, deliberate human event production yielded essentially perfect recognition, though the learning model is relatively robust to elevated scene error rates as documented in Dominey (2000).

## Conclusion

The current study demonstrates (1) that the perceptual primitive of contact (available to infants at 5 months), can be used to perform event description in a manner that is similar to but significantly simpler than Siskind (2001), (2) that a novel implementation of principles from construction grammar can be used to map sentence form to these meanings together in an integrated system, (3) that relative clauses can be processed in a manner that is similar to, but requires

less specific machinery (e.g. no stack) than that in Miikkulainen (1996), and finally (4) that the resulting system displays robust acquisition behavior that reproduces certain observations from developmental studies with very modest “innate” language specificity.

The goal was to identify minimal event recognition and form-to-meaning mapping capabilities that could be integrated into a coherent system that performs at the level of a human infant in the first years of development when the construction inventory is being built up. This forms the basis for the infant’s subsequent ability to de- and re-compose these constructions in a truly compositional manner, a topic of future research.

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