In learning a language, a child must make many generalizations and abstractions—what are the words of my language, what are the categories of those words, what are the grammatical rules about how those categories form sentences, what do the words mean, etc.? Often, the utterances that children hear and the contexts in which they hear them could result in many (sometimes infinitely many!) incorrect generalizations and abstractions—yet children generally make just the right ones, and when they don’t their errors are highly circumscribed and eventually self-corrected. The broad questions that motivate the research in my lab are what is the nature of the learning mechanisms that guide children to make the correct generalizations from their input? What constrains the linguistic representations that children form? We address these questions by investigating specific areas in language acquisition that involve different kinds of linguistic representations: learning the sequences of sound that correspond to words, learning the meanings of words, and learning the grammatical categories of words, e.g., noun, verb, adjective, etc. I’ll briefly described some research involving grammatical category learning.

Sentences are structured around grammatical categories, not individual words, so children must segregate words into categories in order to figure out how their language is structured. But words are not labeled with their category; it’s something learners need to figure out. How do infants and young children do this? We’ve undertaken computational analyses of speech that children hear in a number of languages (thus far, English, Turkish, German, and French) and shown that words can be successfully categorized by attending to a very simple piece of information: the words that immediately surround them in sentences. For example, words flanked by “you” and “it” are almost exclusively verbs in English (e.g., you washed it, you dropped it, etc.). A simple mechanisms that categorizes words based on this simple environment, called a frame, could make a powerful initial step in categorizing together words from the same linguistic category. In research with 12-month-old infants, we’ve shown that infants do, in fact, categorize words based on this kind of information. For example, in an experiment in which we exposed infants to two nonsense words in noun frames—e.g., put the lonk on the box and put the dax on the box—and two different nonsense words in verb frames—e.g., you bist it and you glip it—infants categorized together the words that occurred in the same frames. Since these words had no meanings, infants could only have considered the words’ local environments in successfully categorizing them. Although 12-month-olds can only produce a handful of words, they apparently categorize newly-encountered words from very brief exposures based on their position within utterances.

But did those infants think that bist and glip were really verbs and lonk and dax really nouns, or simply members of distinct, unlabeled categories? We are currently investigating this by testing whether infants are more likely to link nonsense words that occur in verb frames with actions and nonsense words that occur in noun frames to objects. Our preliminary results with 18-month-olds suggest that they do.

**REMEMBER! EVERY WEDNESDAY MORNING IS COFFEE AND PASTRY IN ROOM SGM 501**

Some weeks we will have special guests for conversations about their career paths, their views of Psychology today, and their research projects of greatest personal interest.

**COME MEET OUR SPECIAL GUESTS—BRING QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS!**

**FEBRUARY 4—TODD HARE—9:45 AM**  
**FEBRUARY 11—KAREN HENNIGAN—9:30 AM**  
**FEBRUARY 18—NORMAN MILLER—10:00 AM**  
**FEBRUARY 25—MIRANDA BARONE—10:00 AM**  
**MARCH 4—WOLF GRUNER—9:30 AM**
Laura Baker has been promoted to Full Professor, Congratulations!

Congratulations to JoAnn Farver who has just received two major grants from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for her work on literacy skills of Spanish-speaking English language learners (ELLs). Both studies, which are multi-site, build directly on her prior NSF funded project that was carried out with colleague Chris Lonigan at Florida State University. The IES project will develop and validate a comprehensive assessment instrument for Spanish-speaking ELLs' early literacy skills. The NICHD project will involve a three-group, cluster randomized study of the effectiveness of two variations of a preschool curriculum (developed and tested in the prior NSF project) for enhancing the school readiness skills of 4-year old ELLs.

Brynn Kelly, graduate student (advisor David Schwartz) is presenting a poster entitled ‘Popularity as a Correlate of Community Violence Exposure During Adolescence’ at the prestigious research conference, Society for Research in Child Development this Spring.

Kelly Young-Wolff, graduate student (advisor Carol Prescott) was recently awarded a Society of Multivariate Experimental Psychology Dissertation Award for $1000. SMEP awards help to support the dissertation work of graduate students in psychology and related disciplines, with special emphasis on multivariate approaches to measurement and analysis of substantive problems.

Steven Sussman, a joint appointee Professor of Preventive Medicine from the Keck School of Medicine and Professor of Psychology, published a book called, ‘Drug Abuse: Concepts, Prevention, and Cessation’ with Susan Ames through Cambridge University Press.

Eduardo Vasquez was offered an academic tenure track position at Kent University in England, which he has accepted after taking part in a video conferencing interview made possible by the great people at USC’s College Technology Services. Eduardo Vasquez is a former PhD student of Norman Miller’s.

Charisse Corsbie-Massay graduate student (advisor Stephen Read) has been awarded an EDGE Travel Grant to attend the Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference in Tampa, Florida, February 5, 2009.

Allen Azizian, adjunct faculty member of the Psychology department has been awarded a 2008-2009 Fulbright Scholar grant to travel to Armenia.
Psychology Department
3rd Year Students First Annual
Poster Day

The Psychology Department held its first annual third year Student Poster Day and Pizza Party in December 2009. The following students participated in our first annual poster day:

Rachel Beattie
CharisseCorsbie-Massay
Christopher Courtney
Marissa Ericson
Kean Hsu
Jiye Kim
Lauren Ng
David Pan
John Prindle
Jared Reser
Nicole Sintov
Lauren Spies
Hao Wang
Pan Wang
Alexandra Ycaza
Yan Zhou
Kelly Young-Wolff

Have You Read Anything Good Lately?


Full articles are posted outside SGM 538. Please send your newest / best publications to Twyla Ponton, ponton@usc.edu
UPCOMING EVENTS

USC PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Presents a colloquium with
Lawrence Walley, MD,
FRCPsych, FRCP(E)
Professor Emeritus in Mental Health
Kings College, University of Aberdeen

“Cognitive reserve: An example of reductionism and redundancy in cognitive ageing”

February 11, 2009
12pm—1pm
HNB 100

COLLEGE OF LETTERS, ARTS AND SCIENCES

Departments of Psychology, Political Science, Economics And Biological Sciences

Presents a colloquium with
Todd Hare, Ph.D.
California Institute of Technology

“Self-control in decision-making involves modulation of the vmPFC valuation system”

February 4th, 2009
SGM 414
12pm—1pm

USC Psychology Department Presents a colloquium with

Jack McArdle, Ph.D. and Caleb Finch, Ph.D.

“Graying of the brain begins by 30: Cognitive and cellular findings”

Wednesday, April 8
12—1:00 pm
SGM 414

PF³

“A Conversation with USC graduates who currently hold Academic Jobs”

William Pedersen, Ph.D.,
CSU-Long Beach
Amy Marcus-Newhall, Ph.D.,
Scripps College

February 19, 2009
SGM 414
12pm—1:30pm

PF³

“Dossier Preparation”

Presented by:
Margaret Gatz, Ph.D.
Ashley Borders, Ph.D.

February 4th, 2009
SGM 501
6:30 PM