

Connecting the Dots to Unpack the Language

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ABSTRACT:

Along with many of those at the conference I am assuming that each child constructs his own internal representation of the ambient language based on his experience. How does this process unfold? I believe it involves taking isolated linguistic chunks (or "dots") and discovering how they relate to other dots in a 4-dimensional space, with pragmatic, semantic, phonological, and combinatorial dimensions. Depending on the particular chunk, some connections can be made before others:

- **Down!**, a seemingly simple pragmatic request to be put down, nevertheless has to be integrated into the whole system, including its semantic opposite, **up!**, as well as the verbs it can be combined with (**sit/put/get down**).
- Social phrases like **please** and **thankyou** will first be analyzed pragmatically, with the **you** in **thankyou** only being discovered much later.
- How does a learner deal with a heavily grammaticized adult chunk such as **wanna?** He will have to "ungrammaticize" it before he can produce syntactic contrasts such as **I wanna help you** and **I want you to help me**.

I will draw on my own fairly fine-grained data to trace the life histories of several interestingly contrasting early chunks. We will see some of the pitfalls encountered as the learner integrates them into his growing system.