

Interface Colloquium Series

On Productivity

Charles Yang

***Yale University
Department of Linguistics***

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**UQAM
Pavillon J.A. De Sève
320, rue Sainte-Catherine Est
DS-6365**

ABSTRACT

As Sapir famously observed, "all grammars leak"--which makes it all the more remarkable that we, as language learners, somehow stay dry. There is considerable evidence that children are remarkably good at recognizing and learning productive regularities in the grammar while shelving aside lexically and contextually restricted exceptions for memorization and storage.

This talk sketches out a preliminary model that identifies productive processes and exceptions as such; accordingly, the learner can proceed to internalize them as different kinds of linguistic knowledge. We argue that if a linguistic process is conjectured to be productive, then having exceptions to it can add (surprisingly) significant cost to its online processing. Empirically, we explore these issues in the domain of morphology, which leads to finer-grained analyses of a number of well-known morphological problems.

We also discuss the consequences of the present model in syntactic learning, with special attention to the construction-specific approach to grammar and learning which have enjoyed a revival of late.