



Learnability and Cognition: The Acquisition of Argument Structure (Learning, Development, and Conceptual Change)

Steven Pinker

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When children learn a language, they soon are able to make surprisingly subtle distinctions: "donate them a book" sounds odd, for example, even though "give them a book" is perfectly natural. How can this happen, given that children do not confine themselves to the sentence types they hear, and are usually not corrected when they speak ungrammatically? Steven Pinker resolves this paradox in a detailed theory of how children acquire argument structure.

In tackling a learning paradox that has challenged scholars for more than a decade, Pinker synthesizes a vast literature in linguistics and psycholinguistics and outlines explicit theories of the mental representation, learning, and development of verb meaning and verb syntax. The new theory that he describes has some surprising implications for the relation between language and thought. Pinker's solution provides insight into such key questions as, When do children generalize and when do they stick with what they hear? What is the rationale behind linguistic constraints? How is the syntax of predicates and arguments related to their semantics? What is a possible word meaning? Do languages force their speakers to construe the world in certain ways? Why does children's language seem different from that of adults?

Learnability and Cognition is included in the series *Learning, Development, and Conceptual Change*, edited by Lila Gleitman, Susan Carey, Elissa Newport, and Elizabeth Spelke.

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