

**The University of Pittsburgh ~ Department of Linguistics**

**Colloquium Series *Presents:***

**“Using Cues to Grammar in Language Acquisition”**

**Presented By: Dan Hufnagle**

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**Friday October 17, 2008 @ 3:00 p.m.  
Room 332 ~ Cathedral of Learning**

The fundamental problem of grammatical acquisition is to convert an input consisting of unanalyzed sentences into knowledge of a set of patterns that can accurately describe the grammar of a language. One proposed means of making this problem tractable is that learners may use low-level input cues to help them organize input in a way that makes patterns more easily discoverable. This talk describes a series of experiments using artificial language learning methods that tests whether patterns and cues that signal those patterns emerge simultaneously in development, which is the most likely scenario under which cues could help learners. Experiment One tested the utility of intonation variability as a cue to grammatical phrase structure and found that intonation variability helped adult learners to acquire patterns better, even when the intonation cue was taken away at test. Experiment Two manipulated function words – critical cues to grammatical structure – in a variety of ways. First, function words were manipulated so that they either did or did not contain phonetic cues to category. Phonetic cues to category did not help – and actually hindered – learning. Second, the presence and absence of function words was manipulated during exposure and at test. More function words in the input helped learners acquire patterns better, and more function words at test generally – though not always – hindered learners’ performance. The final set of experiments manipulated variability and repetition of entire sentences, two aspects of input that can help learners discover patterns but are also inversely proportional to one another. Adult learners appear to learn better from more variable input, while 12-month-old infants learned better when the input contained more repeated sentences. I will discuss a variety of reasons for these findings and implications of the complete set of experiments on language acquisition.