Learning Beyond the Input: The Role of Input Distributions and Memory Differences in L2 Generalization

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Adult language learners typically receive relatively limited L2 input, yet they must be able to generalize beyond their experience. Importantly, recent research suggests that not all types of input are equally effective. Input characterized by Zipfian (i.e., skewed) distributions, which mirror natural language data by concentrating a few lexical items in most of the input, has been proposed to facilitate the learning of linguistic constructions. However, evidence from L2 research on the effects of Zipfian input remains mixed.

In this talk, I re-examine how input distributions affect the learnability of linguistic constructions by investigating their interaction with individual differences in working memory (WM). Drawing on dual-system learning models (e.g., Ashby et al., 1998; Ullman, 2016), which propose that adults may rely on multiple memory systems to perform learning tasks, I argue that learners' WM resources may shape how effectively they learn from different input distributions. Across two experiments involving healthy adults (Experiment 1) and post-concussion adults (Experiment 2) learning Spanish "verbs of becoming", I test the hypothesis that input distribution effects on learning depend on WM span. I conclude by discussing potential extensions of this work to other constructions and languages and its implications for models of L1 and L2 acquisition.