

# Automatically Learning Measures of Child Language Development

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## Abstract

We propose a new approach for the creation of child language development metrics. A set of linguistic features is computed on child speech samples and used as input in two age prediction experiments. In the first experiment, we learn a child-specific metric and predicts the ages at which speech samples were produced. We then learn a more general developmental index by applying our method across children, predicting relative temporal orderings of speech samples. In both cases we compare our results with established measures of language development, showing improvements in age prediction performance.

## 1 Introduction

The rapid childhood development from a seemingly blank slate to language mastery is a puzzle that linguists and psychologists continue to ponder. While the precise mechanism of language learning remains poorly understood, researchers have developed measures of developmental language progress using child speech patterns. These metrics provide a means of diagnosing early language disorders. Besides this practical benefit, precisely measuring grammatical development is a step towards understanding the underlying language learning process.

Previous NLP work has sought to automate the calculation of handcrafted developmental metrics proposed by psychologists and linguists. In this paper, we investigate a more fundamental question: Can we use machine learning techniques to create

a more robust developmental measure itself? If so, how well would such a measure generalize across children? This last question touches on an underlying assumption made in much of the child language literature— that while children progress grammatically at different rates, they follow fixed stages in their development. If a developmental index automatically learned from one set of children could be accurately applied to others, it would vindicate this assumption of shared developmental paths.

Several metrics of language development have been set forth in the psycholinguistics literature. Standard measures include Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) (Brown, 1973)— the average length in morphemes of conversational turns, Index of Productive Syntax (IPSYN) (Scarborough, 1990)— a multi-tiered scoring process where over 60 individual features are counted by hand and combined into tiered scores, and D-Level (Rosenberg et al., 1987; Covington et al., 2006)— a score for individual sentences based on the observed presence of key syntactic structures. Today, these hand-crafted metrics persist as measurements of child language development, each taking a slightly different angle to assess the same question: Exactly how much grammatical knowledge does a young learner possess?

NLP technology has been applied to help automate the otherwise tedious calculation of these measures. Computerized Profiling (CP) (Long and Channell, 2001) is a software package that produces semi-automated language assessments, using part-of-speech tagging and human supervision. In response to its limited depth of analysis and the necessity for human supervision in CP, there have since

	D-Level	Article Count	“Be” Count	Fn. / Content	Prep. Count	Word Freq.	Depth	MLU
Adam	0.798	0.532	0.817	0.302	0.399	0.371	0.847	0.855
Abe	0.633	0.479	0.591	0.144	0.269	0.413	0.534	0.625
Ross	0.252	0.153	-0.061	0.125	0.314	0.209	0.134	0.165
Peter	0.371	0.429	0.781	0.562	0.638	0.657	0.524	0.638
Naomi	0.812	0.746	0.540	0.652	0.504	0.609	0.710	0.710
Sarah	0.829	0.550	0.733	0.382	0.654	0.570	0.731	0.808
Nina	0.824	0.758	0.780	0.560	0.451	0.429	0.780	0.890
Mean:	0.646	0.521	0.597	0.390	0.461	0.465	0.609	0.670

Table 1:  $\tau$  of each feature versus time, for each individual child. In this and all following tables, traditional developmental metrics are shaded.

been implementations of completely automated assessments of IPSYN (Sagae et al., 2005) and D-Level (Lu, 2009) which take advantage of automatic parsing and achieve results comparable to manual assessments. Likewise, in the ESL domain, Chen and Zechner (2011) automate the evaluation of syntactic complexity of non-native speech.

Thus, it has been demonstrated that NLP techniques can compute existing scores of language proficiency. However, the definition of first-language developmental metrics has as yet been left up to human reasoning. In this paper, we consider the automatic induction of more accurate developmental metrics using child language data. We extract features from longitudinal child language data and conduct two sets of experiments. For individual children, we use least-squares regression over our features to predict the age of a held-out language sample. We find that on average, existing single metrics of development are outperformed by a weighted combination of our features.

In our second set of experiments, we investigate whether metrics can be learned across children. To do so, we consider a speech sample ordering task. We use optimization techniques to learn weightings over features that allow generalization across children. Although traditional measures like MLU and D-level perform well on this task, we find that a learned combination of features outperforms any single pre-defined developmental score.

## 2 Data

To identify trends in child language learning we need a corpus of child speech samples, which we

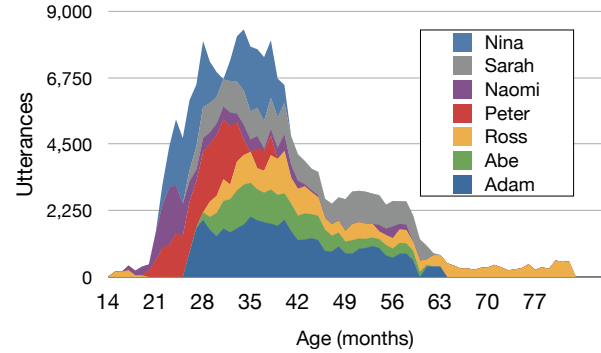


Figure 1: Number of utterances across ages of each child in our corpus. Sources: Nina (Suppes, 1974), Sarah (Brown, 1973), Naomi (Sachs, 1983), Peter (Bloom et al., 1974; Bloom et al., 1975), Ross (MacWhinney, 2000), Abe (Kuczaj, 1977) and Adam (Brown, 1973)

take from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000). CHILDES is a collection of corpora from many studies of child language based on episodic speech data. Since we are interested in development over time, our corpus consists of seven longitudinal studies of individual children. Data for each child is grouped and sorted by the child’s age in months, so that we have a single data point for each month in which a child was observed. The size of our data set, broken down by child, is shown in Figure 1.

We take advantage of automatic dependency parses bundled with the CHILDES transcripts (Sagae et al., 2007) and harvest features that should be informative and complementary in assessing grammatical knowledge. We first note three standard measures of language development: (i) MLU, a measure of utterance length, (ii) mean depth of dependency parse trees, a measure of syntactic complexity similar to that of Yngve (1960), and (iii) D-level, a measure of linguistic competence based on observations of syntactic constructions.

Beyond the three traditional developmental metrics, we record five additional features. We count two of Brown’s (1973) obligatory morphemes — articles and contracted auxiliary “be” verbs — as well as occurrences of any preposition. These counted features are normalized by a child’s total number of utterances at a given age. Finally, we include two vocabulary-centric features: Average word fre-

	D-Level	Depth	MLU	All Features
<b>Adam</b>	14.037	14.149	<b>11.128</b>	14.175
<b>Abe</b>	34.69	44.701	<b>34.509</b>	39.931
<b>Ross</b>	329.64	336.612	345.046	<b>244.071</b>
<b>Peter</b>	23.58	13.045	<b>8.245</b>	24.128
<b>Naomi</b>	<b>24.458</b>	28.426	34.956	45.036
<b>Sarah</b>	12.503	20.878	13.905	<b>6.989</b>
<b>Nina</b>	7.654	6.477	4.255	<b>3.96</b>
<b>Mean</b>	63.795	66.327	64.578	<b>54.041</b>

Table 2: Mean squared error from 10-fold cross validation of linear regression on individual children. The lowest error for each child is shown in bold.

quency (i.e. how often a word is used in a standard corpus) as indicated by CELEX (Baayen et al., 1995), and the child’s ratio of function words (determiners, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliaries and conjunctions) to content words.

To validate a developmental measure, we rely on the assumption that a perfect metric should increase monotonically over time. We therefore calculate Kendall’s Tau coefficient ( $\tau$ ) between an ordering of each child’s speech samples by age, and an ordering by the given scoring metric. The  $\tau$  coefficient is a measure of rank correlation where two identical orderings receive a  $\tau$  of 1, complete opposite orderings receive a  $\tau$  of -1, and independent orderings are expected to receive a  $\tau$  of zero. The  $\tau$  coefficients for each of our 8 features individually applied to the 7 children are shown in Table 1.

We note that the pre-defined indices of language development — MLU, tree depth and D-Level — perform the ordering task most accurately. To illustrate the degree of variance between children and features, we also include plots of each child’s D-Level and contracted auxiliary “be” usage in Figure 2.

### 3 Experiments

**Learning Individual Child Metrics** Our first task is to predict the age at which a held-out speech sample was produced, given a set of age-stamped samples from the same child. We perform a least squares regression on each child, treating age as the dependent variable, and our features as independent variables. Each data set is split into 10 random folds of 90% training and 10% test data. Mean squared error is reported in Table 2. On average, our regression

MLU	All Features	MLU & Fn. / Content
0.7456	0.7457	<b>0.7780</b>

Table 3: Average  $\tau$  of orderings produced by MLU (the best traditional index) and our learned metric, versus true chronological order. Highest  $\tau$  is shown in bold.

achieves lower error than any individual feature by itself.

**Learning General Metrics Across Children** To produce a universal metric of language development like MLU or D-Level, we train on data pooled across many children. For each of 7 folds, a single child’s data is separated as a test set while the remaining children are used for training. Since Ross is the only child with samples beyond 62 months, we do not attempt to learn a general measure of language development at these ages, but rather remove these data points.

Unlike the individual-child case, we do not predict absolute ages based on speech samples, as each child is expected to learn at a different rate. Instead, we learn an ordering model which attempts to place each sample in its relative place in time. The model computes a score from a weighted quadratic combination of our features and orders the samples based on their computed scores. To learn the parameters of the model, we seek to maximize the Kendall  $\tau$  between true and predicted orderings, summed over the training children. We pass this objective function to Nelder-Mead (Nelder and Mead, 1965), a standard gradient-free optimization algorithm. Nelder-Mead constructs a simplex at its initial guess of parameter values and iteratively makes small shifts in the simplex to satisfy a descent condition until a local maximum is reached.

We report the average Kendall  $\tau$  achieved by this algorithm over several feature combinations in Table 3. Because we modify our data set in this experiment, for comparison we also show the average Kendall  $\tau$  achieved by MLU on the truncated data.

### 4 Discussion

Our first set of experiments verified that we can achieve a decrease in mean squared error over existing metrics in a child-specific age prediction task. However, the results of this experiment are skewed

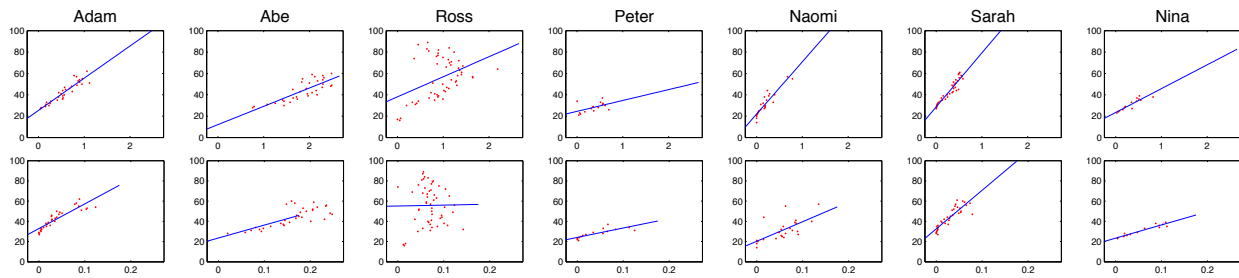


Figure 2: Child age plotted against D-Level (top) and counts of contracted auxiliary “be” (bottom) with best fit lines. Since our regression predicts child age, age in months is plotted on the y-axis.

in favor of the learned metric by the apparent difficulty of predicting Ross’s age. As demonstrated in Figure 2, Ross’s data exhibits major variance, and also includes data from later ages than that of the other children. It is well known that MLU’s performance as a measure of linguistic ability quickly drops off with age.

During our first experiment, we also attempted to capture more nuanced learning curves than the linear case. Specifically, we anticipated that learning over time should follow an S-shaped curve. This follows from observations of a “fast mapping” spurt in child word learning (Woodward et al., 1994), and the idea that learning must eventually level off as mastery is attained. To allow our model to capture non-linear learning rates, we fit logit and quadratic functions to the data. Despite the increased freedom, only Nina’s predictions benefited from these more complex models. With every other child, these functions fit the data to a linear section of the curve and yielded much larger errors than simple linear regression. The preference towards linearity may be due to the limited time span of our data. With higher ages, the leveling off of linguistic performance would need to be modeled.

In our second set of experiments, we attempted to learn a general metric across children. Here we also achieved positive results with simple methods, just edging out established measures of language development. The generality of our learned metric supports the hypothesis that children follow similar paths of language development. Although our learned solution is slightly more favorable than pre-existing metrics, it performs very little learning. Using all features, learned parameter weights remain at or extremely close to the starting point of 1.

Through trial and error, we discovered we could improve performance by omitting certain features. In Table 3, we report the best discovered feature combination including only two relatively uncorrelated features, MLU and function/content word ratio. If downweighting some features yields a better result, we would expect to discover that with our optimization algorithm, but this evidently not the case, perhaps due to our limited sample of 7 children.

The fact that weights move so little suggests that our best result is stuck in a local maximum. To investigate this, we also experimented with Differential Evolution (Storn and Price, 1997) and SVM-ranking (Joachims, 2002), the former a global optimization technique, and the latter a method developed specifically to learn orderings. Although these algorithms are more willing to adjust parameter weights and theoretically should not get stuck in local maxima, they are still edged out in performance by Nelder-Mead. It may be that the early stopping of Nelder-Mead serves as a sort of smoothing in this very small data-set of 7 children.

Our improvements over hand-crafted measures of language development show promise. In the case of individual children, we outperform existing measures of development, especially past the early stages of development when MLU ceases to correlate with age. Our attempts to learn a metric across children met with more limited success. However, when we restricted our regression to two of the least correlated features, MLU and the function/content word ratio, we were able to beat manually created metrics. These results suggest that more sophisticated models and techniques combined with more data could lead to more accurate metrics as well as insights into the language learning process.

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