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Associative learning accounts for recursive-structure generation in crows

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Summary:

Recursive sequence generation, i.e., the ability to transfer recursive patterns to novel items, was recently reported in crows (Liao et al., 2022). Here, we argue that although the reported data are certainly compatible with the recursion hypothesis, they can also be explained by other, much simpler mechanisms of associative learning.

Main Text

The recursion hypothesis states that recursion, the cognitive ability to generate an infinite range of expressions from a finite set of items, is the only unique human component of the language faculty and is a distinguishing feature absent from all other animal communication systems (Hauser et al., 2002). Center-embedded structures is one type of recursive structure that has been frequently used to test the recursion hypothesis in different species (e.g., Perruchet & Rey, 2005; Rey et al., 2012). One example of center-embedded (CE) structure in human language is “*The antelope [a_1] the lion [a_2] ate [b_2] ran like a snail [b_1]*” in which the sentence “*the lion [a_2] ate [b_2]*” is embedded within the sentence “*The antelope [a_1] ran like a snail [b_1]*”, producing the $a_1a_2b_2b_1$ CE structure.

A recent study (Liao et al., 2022) claims to demonstrate that crows (*Corvus corone*) have recursive capabilities. Using an experimental paradigm previously tested on U.S. adults, Tsimane’ adults, U.S. children, and rhesus monkeys (*Macaca mulatta*) (Ferrigno et al., 2020), they found that crows were able to transfer center-embedded structure to never-before-seen items, suggesting that recursive capabilities are not restricted to the primate lineage.

In Experiment 1, two crows were trained to produce a sequence of 4 pecks on a touchscreen following two lists of 4 visual items. The first and second lists were respectively composed of the 4 following symbols: { () } and { [] }, where two inner pairs of symbols (i.e., () and []) were systematically embedded into a unique outer pair of symbols (i.e., { }). The 4 visual symbols were presented simultaneously on the screen and crows had to learn to peck them in these specific

orders. Note that pairs of symbols (i.e., { }) were displayed with the same font color which provided an additional visual cue. Once they had reached a sufficient level of performance, a small proportion of transfer trials (i.e., 10%) were introduced among the training trials. Transfer trials were composed of the embedded pairs of List 1 and 2 (i.e., () and []) and crows were simply expected to peck these 4 symbols. Irrespective of the pecking order they produced, they received positive reinforcement. Analysis of the response patterns produced by crows nicely showed that they preferentially produced more center-embedded patterns (i.e., ([]) or [()]) than crossed (i.e., ([]) or [(])) or tail-embedded (i.e., () [] or [] ()) patterns. On average, the distribution of response patterns was similar to the one previously obtained for children from 3 to 4 years old (Ferrigno et al., 2020). The authors took this result as evidence that crows have recursive abilities.

A careful examination of the method section reveals however that an alternative account of this result is possible in terms of simpler associative learning mechanisms. Indeed, although not immediately visible, we can see that the last two symbols of each sequence were surrounded by a visible border (e.g., { ([] [])}). Crows probably used these additional visual cues by learning that they *should not* be pecked first in order to get the positive reinforcement that is given at the end of the sequence. Figure S1 (from their supplementary material) provides a clear confirmation that crows learned to avoid these bordered symbols. This figure represents the proportion of each possible sequence of responses ($n = 24$) for the transfer trials (we thank the first author of the study who confirmed that the order of the 24 possible sequences has to be read from bottom to top, an important detail

that is not provided in the legend of the figure). From this figure, it appears that about 94% of the produced sequences never started with bordered symbols. Again, this result is not surprising because crows were punished during training when they began by pecking one of the bordered stimuli.

Therefore, on transfer trials, when crows are presented the 4 symbols in a random order on the screen (i.e., ([])), they will preferentially peck first the two symbols without any border, i.e., (or [. Then, since they also have learned during the training phase that after pecking (or [, they should respectively peck] or] to get rewarded, they are more likely to produce these learned adjacent associations. Finally, the fourth peck can be made by default, with crows selecting the only stimulus that has not been touched before or that was systematically associated to the reward.

On the basis of these two simple associative learning mechanisms (i.e., 1. Avoid bordered symbols or select symbols not surrounded by a border and 2. Peck the visual symbol which has been associated during training to the second pecked symbol), we can easily explain why crows produced more patterns qualified as “center-embedded” than other patterns. According to this two-stage associative learning account, the apparent recursive processing would be in fact a by-product of simple associative learning mechanisms (see also Rey et al., 2012).

A similar explanation holds for Experiment 2 in which crows were retrained with two novel lists of center-embedded sequences using three novel pairs of stimuli (i.e., List 1: < [] > ; List 2: [()] ; note that symbol pairs from the two lists were displayed with different colors). Transfer trials were composed of the

94 outer pair from List 1 (i.e., $< \boxed{>}$) and the inner pair from List 2 (i.e., $(\boxed{ })$), and
 95 under these novel combinations, crows massively produced center-embedded
 96 responses (e.g., $< (\boxed{ } \boxed{ }) >$). However, the two-stage associative learning account
 97 also works perfectly here by assuming that crows select borderless stimuli first and
 98 more specifically, based on their learning of List 1 and List 2, they preferentially
 99 select the first item from List 1 which is the only item they have learned to peck
 100 first (i.e., “<”). Then, after selecting the other borderless stimulus (i.e., “(“), they
 101 have learned to peck its paired item (i.e., “)”). The final peck can be done by default,
 102 as in Experiment 1.

103 In Experiment 3, the two training lists were composed of two embeddings
 104 instead of one and the last element of each pair of symbols was again surrounded
 105 by a border (i.e., List 1 : $\{ (\boxed{ } \boxed{ }) \}$; List 2 : $< [\boxed{ } \boxed{ }] >$). Transfer trials were
 106 either composed of the inner pair of List 1 (i.e., $(\boxed{ })$) and the outer and middle pairs
 107 of List 2 (i.e., $< [\boxed{ }] >$), leading to “swap” trials, or composed of the same outer and
 108 middle pairs from List 2 (i.e., $< [\boxed{ }] >$) and one middle pair of List 1 (i.e., $[\boxed{ }]$), leading
 109 to “joint” trials. In both cases, crows produced a majority of center-embedded
 110 patterns, although the proportion was higher for “swap” compared to “joint” trials.
 111 Here also, the two-stage associative learning account can explain these results by
 112 assuming that the three first pecks were generated by avoiding bordered stimuli
 113 and by selecting the symbols that were systematically learned as first and second
 114 responses during training (i.e., $< [\boxed{ }]$). The third peck could be generated by default
 115 by selecting the remaining borderless stimulus (i.e., “(” for “swap” trials or “[” for
 116 “joint” trials). The reason why “swap” trials produced more center-embedded

patterns is because after pecking “(”, crows had learned from List 1 to peck [] while they did not have this possibility for the innermost pair of stimuli of the sequences used in “joint” trials.

To sum up, the conclusion that crows are endowed with abstract recursive capacities is a possible interpretation of the results reported by Liao et al. (2022) and Ferrigno et al. (2020). However, this is not the only one. In agreement with previous studies (e.g., Rey et al., 2012), crow performance can also be fully explained by simpler associative learning mechanisms, such as the two-stage associative learning account presented here, without any need to resort to the complex recursion hypothesis.

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