Psycho? Logical? Bulletin

October 2006

In this issue:
Fantasy Football League Update (page 2)
Who Drank the last Diet Coke? (page 3)
Caption Contest (pages 8-9)
Various and Sundry other items of interest
The department’s kickoff bash was a good time for all, as these photos empirically demonstrate.

You see? Roxanne, Jared, and Saudamini were clearly having a good time!

The PLB is reasonably sure that these people are laughing *with* Ken.

Many of the finest schools of photojournalism devote entire classes to framing your photos. The PLB did not attend any of these schools. And, if it had, the PLB’s grades would probably not have been so outstanding.
Almost a quarter of the way into the season, Brooke Feeney and Miriam Rosenberg-Lee* are tied atop the standings of the department fantasy football league. Brooke’s team, in particular, has been an unstoppable flaming juggernaut: she’s outscored the next highest-scoring team in the league by almost 20%, and her team, “The Cavaliers,” is undefeated. Miriam’s team, which was assembled using the unique strategy of drafting “only cute players” is also undefeated.

Department Head Mike Scheier is, ahem, not undefeated. Anonymous sources within the department administration tell the PLB that Scheier is scouring the department bylaws to see if there are any rules against beating a department head in fantasy football. If there are none, he is expected to propose some at the next faculty meeting.

*Why, you ask, is Miriam not in the headlines if she’s also atop the league standings? Go ahead and try and find something that rhymes with “Miriam” or “Rosenberg.” Take your time. The PLB will be waiting#

#To those of you that came up with Hosenberg: yes, you’re very clever. However, it’s difficult to see how the German word for “Pants Mountain” would contribute to a relevant headline

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Luca Onnis to give talk on October 9th Room 336B, 12-1:30pm
“Variability is the spice of learning”

An important aspect of language acquisition is learning syntactic nonadjacent dependencies between words, such as subject/verb agreement or tense marking in English. Despite the fact that infants and adults can track adjacent relations in order to infer the structure of sequential stimuli, the evidence is not conclusive for learning nonadjacent items. In four experiments, we provide evidence that discovering A_B nonadjacent dependencies in an AXB artificial language is possible, provided it is modulated by the variability of the intervening X elements between A_B pairs. Detection of nonadjacencies improves significantly with either zero or large variability, and in such conditions is independent of the embedded X elements. In addition, the same variability-mediated learning applies to visual abstract stimuli, suggesting that similar statistical computations are computed across sensory modalities.

We discuss that learning nonadjacencies is clearly modulated by the statistical properties of the input, although crucially the obtained U-shape learning curve cannot be explained by current associative mechanisms of artificial grammar learning. We show, however, that a Simple Recurrent Network trained on similar conditions to the human experiments, captures the U-shape learning curve.
PITTSBURGH (PLB News) - The first faculty meeting of the year was a joyous occasion for many, a time to come together and reconnect with old friends. But dissent arose at the meeting when Professor David Rakison drank the last Diet Coke.

“I was so thirsty,” Lori Holt recounted to reporters, “And then I saw that there was a Diet Coke, so I was going to quench my thirst. But Rakison grabbed it first and gulped it down.” Dr. Holt’s story was echoed by several other “very thirsty” attendees of the meeting.

Although his consumption of the Diet Coke was an unpopular decision, Rakison defended it by referring to evolutionary psychology. “It was a very straightforward choice. There was a resource in the environment: the Diet Coke. And whoever controls that resource improves their chances of mating and passing on their genes. By staying hydrated, I’m more likely to reproduce successfully.”

Members of the department reacted with some skepticism to Rakison’s claims. Health psychologist Sheldon Cohen questioned the benefits of Diet Coke. “It (Diet Coke) has no calories, no nutrients, no essential vitamins or minerals. The only possible benefit it has is to keep you hydrated. But the caffeine content is so high that I’m not even sure it does that effectively. Maybe with Caffeine-free Diet Coke you’d have an argument.”

Bobby Klatzky was even more doubtful of Rakison’s claims. “To me, the problem with arguments from evolutionary psychology is that they sound like just-so stories. They provide justifications for things that have already happened. For example, what if instead of drinking the last Diet Coke, David had eaten the last fortune cookie? Would we now be talking about how evolutionary psychology makes people want to eat fortune cookies? These kinds of accounts never seem to make predictions, and I’ve always found that a little frustrating!”

Do you have a story you’d like to submit to the PLB? E-mail it to CMUPLB@hotmail.com

As you can see, we’ll print just about anything!
FCE Update

Last year, the Faculty Senate almost made a decision on the form FCEs should take in the future (Return to the original form? Continue to administer them online?), but decided, instead, to create a committee. As such, the long-form online FCEs will continue to be used for the entirety of this year. The committee has started the process of polling the CMU community, and the results of that polling will be presented at the next Faculty Senate Meeting on October 17th, at which point we will make a decision about whether or not to make a decision.*

* Or possibly not. The Faculty Senate’s motto used to be “Measure Twice, Cut Once.” But then someone said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. That’s way too much cutting. And not enough measuring.”

Health Care Update

Most employers in this region cover somewhere between 70-85% of health care costs; CMU covers around 75%

Health care costs for faculty and staff will increase by 8%, on average, next year, although your individual increase depends on the plan you’re in

The University’s costs will increase by “somewhat less” than 8%. You know those commercials where dealers say they got a great deal, and they’re passing the savings on to you? This is kind of like that, except exactly the opposite

The retirement requirements for continuing health care coverage are likely to change to age 60, with a minimum 5 years of service. Before, they were ambiguous
The September meeting was lively -- most of it was a presentation by two CMU Parking office representatives. Michelle Porter and Tim Michael were nice enough to take time to join us and clarify issues and dilemmas that have arisen this year due mostly to two big changes on campus: The Gates construction and resultant parking shuffle, and the new “stacked” parking option in the Morewood lot. I personally take the bus (which has its own unique set of issues and dilemmas), but I know a lot of you are concerned with parking, so here are my notes.

Most parking spots are leased by faculty & staff; there’s a big shortage for students, and a waiting list of >150 students as of the end of September. CMU may follow the lead of other schools, and exclude freshmen from having cars on campus.

The good news: Despite all the re-shuffling, 85% of those requesting a certain location got their first choice (last year that number was in the low 90’s).

Bad news: Staff Council reps reported they and their constituents are having communication problems with Parking Services: e-mails ignored, not getting news in a timely fashion, etc.

More bad news: Michelle hinted that as a result of new card technology, they may start charging folks to park in the garage and lots after 6 p.m. (and presumably weekends, too).

The new parking shuttle circulating between campus & lots is sorely underused.

The new Morewood stacked parking option is also unpopular. There are still ~200 unleased spots. The original idea was for attendants to take your keys, “stack” your car, and give them back to you at the end of the day. Because there are so many open spots left, current users have plenty of room to park themselves, and take their keys with them.

For the Morewood stacked lot, the plan was to allow on-site key dropoff/retrieval from an attendant stationed on the lot between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. After 6, you need to walk to the East Garage parking office. There were concerns raised about the utility of that plan, particularly when it’s cold, snowy, icy, etc. For those who work 2nd or 3rd shifts at night, and in view of the random acts of violence happening on urban campuses after hours, safety is another issue.

The Gates building is projected to be finished in 2009. When it is, it’ll offer some spots, but not as many as before, and they’ll cost more by virtue of being garage spots.

A rep asked why more spots or discounts weren’t reserved for carpoolers. Fabulous idea!

Another person noted how steeply parking fees go up every year, when at the same time [inflation-adjusted] salaries are stagnant and costs of healthcare & other benefits are rising.

Others raised concerns about: folks with disabilities who got bumped away - due to Gates - from their building’s lot and across campus; cars abandoned for lengthy periods in the East Garage; SUV owners who park in Compact Car spots, thus hogging 2 spaces; and a thick layer of neglected pigeon doo-doo in the Dithridge Garage.

Did you know there’s an E. Garage discount card for people who only occasionally need to park at school? Now you do!
Health Care Notes

Barbara Smith of HR reported at a Staff Council meeting on 9/22 that flu shots will be at no cost for faculty & staff at the Benefits & Fitness Fair on Thursday, November 2.

Open Enrollment begins October 30th and ends November 10th. It’s a healthcare, drug, and vision election year, NOT a dental year.

On average, the cost of health care benefits, including prescription drug benefits, will increase ~ 8% for 2007. Increases vary by plan due to plan design, network discounts and experience.

All health plan options offered in 2006 will be continued in 2007.

Due to interest in providers not covered under the Davis Vision Plan (e.g., Mallinger), an alternative vision plan will be offered at open enrollment.

The medical flexible spending account (FSA) maximum will be increased from $3,000 to $5,000 for 2007, but the expanded grace period for incurring expenses offered for 2005 and 2006 will not be available in 2007 in order to position the university to offer a Health Savings Account (HSA) plan in 2008 (fed. law says the two options cannot be offered simultaneously). One of the nice things about HSAs versus FSAs is that HSAs are NOT “use it or lose it”. You can roll unspent money in your account over to the next year, rather than having it confiscated at the end of the year as a penalty for not spending it.

Our current prescription provider, PharmaCare, updates its formulary prescription list several times during the year (quarterly?). What this means is that if you have a particular drug and it is a maintenance medication, it can go on or off the formulary list at any time during the year, which can make your co-payment either higher or lower depending on its current status. If you have not placed a maintenance mail order prescription in a while, check to make sure the co-pay is the same before placing your order. (Sometimes PharmaCare mails us pamphlets with formulary updates; also try their website, www.pharmacare.com [you’ll need to log in])

Two Important Campus Forums!

A Benefits Open Forum (informal Q&A) will be held on Thursday, October 5th, at noon in the UC McKenna Room.

President Cohon will present a CMU President’s Forum on Monday, October 9th. (This is not limited to the topic of healthcare.) It’s from 4-5:30.

Unlike past forums, e-mailing questions in advance is being discouraged, so if you want a voice, show up and don’t be shy!
Kayaking Trip Pictures!

Our training session was only 2 minutes long, but it turned us into paddling machines.

The weather was perfect for great views of the downtown skyline and Ken Koedinger.

Brooke Feeney did not capsize even once!
Contest!

Last Month’s Photo:

Suggested Captions:
Will their babies be Cowdingers? -- Bobby Klatzky

Unfortunately for Ken, what happens in NikeTown does NOT stay in NikeTown.
Ken Koedinger demonstrates one of the controversial “New School” milking techniques. -- Erik Thiessen
Send your caption suggestions to Rakison@andrew.cmu.edu!

And if you have any photos of your friends (or enemies?) within the department that you would like to see captioned, send them along as well!
How to Tell if You’re Diving Too Fast
Submitted by Theresa Treasure

PLB Shout-Out

This month’s Shout-Out goes out to Bobby Klatzky, for organizing the Cognitive Core Course. Bobby has put a lot of effort into getting the syllabus together, putting the Blackboard site up, and making sure everyone (especially teachers) knows where they’re supposed to be, when!

Note: the PLB is not completely certain the person pictured here is Bobby, but we found the picture on her website, and it was too neat not to run with it. The PLB hopes this glimpse into our high editing standards has been informative!

Remember! Anyone can feel free to submit their own PLB Shout-Out at any time.

Just e-mail your suggestions to CMUPLB@hotmail.com
October’s Graduate Student of the Month is Jessica Cicchino, who is one of the few graduate students who runs the risk of babies spitting up on her. It actually happened just before our interview, but Jesss showed up anyhow. The PLB would probably have just gone home for the day after getting vomited on. It’s one of our editorial policies.

**PLB: Tell us a bit about your background.**
JC: I’m originally from New Jersey, kind of near the Shore, and I want to undergrad at Vassar College, which is a little liberal arts school about an hour and a half north of New York City.

**PLB: Were you a psychology major?**
JC: I was a cognitive science major. Most of the research I did was on categorization with adults.

**PLB: What drew you to CMU?**
JC: I actually came here for the summer before my senior year and worked in David Rakison’s lab. So that’s how I knew about CMU, and how I became interested in infancy research. And it also gave me a chance to learn that David and I got along well, which was important to know.

**PLB: So you’ve done both infant and adult research. What do you like about babies? Why work with them? After all, adults don’t usually throw up on you.**
JC: Babies are the best place to look for where knowledge comes from, where things start. How experience shapes you, or how things change over time – it’s easy when you’re looking at people who are changing quickly.

**PLB: What kinds of questions are you researching?**
JC: I’m interested in how infants’ environments and experiences can shape what they know about how things move and how animate and inanimate objects differ. More generally, about how infants’ experiences shape their knowledge. So I look at questions about how gaining the ability to move around affects infants, and I’m also looking at how infants know that animals are goal-directed.

**PLB: You’re also TAing this semester. Is it your first time?**
JC: I’ve TA’d for Child Development before. I’m TAing Developmental Research Methods this semester.

**PLB: What have you learned from TAing?**
JC: How much you need to involve students in lectures, and how giving lectures is not the same as giving a talk. That’s something I think I still have trouble with!
PLB: TAing is a great chance to learn about teaching. What other things have you learned here, and how would you characterize our graduate program?
JC: Well, one of the strengths of our program is that you start doing research right from the start, and that leads to giving a lot of talks about your research. I feel like that makes us get much better at giving talks. Also, there aren’t a lot of classes, especially if you’re not in CNBC or PIER. It’s very independent. It’s really important to learn how to manage your time well. If you don’t do anything, no one will bother you for a while, because you’re more autonomous here than as an undergraduate.

PLB: So what sorts of things do you do in your spare time?
JC: I like to make jewelry. I’m not all that great at it, though. I also like to knit, and I’m not all that great at it, either. But I like arts and crafty things!

PLB: Well, you’ve almost survived. But now you must face your most difficult challenge: the PLB’s patented Approximately Three Tough Questions. Number one. What, for you, is the big question you want to answer with your research?
JC: Where does knowledge come from? To me, that’s the most important question, that’s why I study development.

PLB: Who, from the department, would you most want to be stranded on a desert island with, other than your adviser?
JC: I guess Yvonne. She could knit me a sweater.

PLB: Finally, the third question. David Rakison, of course, is famously said to look more like a rock star than a scientist. What do YOU look more like than a scientist?
JC: Ooooh. I don’t know. This one’s a hard one! Not a rock star, certainly. I get a lot of people saying that I look like Christina Ricci in the movie Casper. But only specifically when she was in Casper, not in anything else. So, ah, maybe I look more like a mid-adolescent movie star than a scientist?

Is this Christina Ricci or Jess Cicchino hugging Bill Pullman? The PLB’s lips are sealed.
Vacation Pictures!

The PLB is always looking for more vacation photos! Keep sending them in.

Niels Taatgen and Stefani Nellen went to China and Tibet on their vacation!