The “Spotty-Data Problem” and Boundaries of Grammar*

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The main job of a linguist is to study grammar—either universal grammar, which includes common properties shared by all languages, or the grammar of a particular language. The job would be easier if the boundaries of grammar were clear, but often they are not. A few examples are taken from phonology, with a focus on what I call the “spotty-data” problem, which refers to the fact that we often do not have enough data to determine where the boundaries of grammar are.

Key words: spotty-data problem, grammaticality, gradient judgment, phonotactic frequency, potential words

* Matthew Chen has shown many people, including myself, how to do phonology. His works, always clear, theoretically pertinent, and descriptively grounded on solid data, have set a high standard for others to follow. I am pleased to contribute to this volume in his honor, in order to continue the quest for a better understanding of phonology, grammar, and the human mind. This paper benefited from the comments of two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this volume, to whom I am grateful.