Monday 9 October, 1-2pm in Chandler House G10

Dr Ben Ambridge - Institute of Psychology Health and Society, University of Liverpool

The Retreat from Overgeneralisation in Child Language Acquisition

Many different animal species have systems of communication that are remarkably sophisticated. However, human languages are unique in that they afford speakers the productivity to express new meanings. Perhaps the most impressive examples of productivity are seen when speakers combine words to produce entirely novel sentences, (e.g., Chomsky's famous example Colorless green ideas sleep furiously). But this productivity comes at a cost. The mechanisms that yield this capacity suggest generalizations that would be considered unacceptable by native adult speakers. For example, the generalization that allows verbs attested in the intransitive construction to be generalized into the transitive construction (The ball rolled --> John rolled the ball) yields overgeneralization errors for verbs such as laugh (e.g., The man laughed --> *The joke laughed the man). Explaining how children retreat from these errors (or- in some cases - avoid them altogether) is a key challenge for all theories of language acquisition, from whatever theoretical perspective. In this talk, I will argue on the basis of a series of grammaticality judgment studies conducted with children and adults, that children retreat from error using both semantic and distributional learning procedures, and outline a preliminary hybrid account that combines both mechanisms.