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Dr Catriona Silvey – Department of Language & Cognition, UCL

Investigating the origin of relational word meanings

Relational words, such as adpositions and transitive verbs, describe relationships between objects. The precise meanings of these words vary depending on the objects they take as arguments. The schematic, mutable nature of these meanings is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, relational word meanings are key to the richness and flexibility of language (for example, they are the source of many metaphors and analogies). On the other hand, they are notoriously difficult for children to learn. Previous work has shown that language input plays a key role in enabling the acquisition of these meanings. Words act as reliable cues across contexts, allowing children to ignore salient variation in objects and pick out the ‘right’ relations. However, this creates a chicken-and-egg problem: if relational meanings are hard to learn without the help of language input, how did they become lexicalised in the first place? Furthermore, a huge number of relations are present in any given situation: what determines which of these relations a language will pick out? In this talk, I will present experimental work using an artificial language to explore the hypothesis that learners are biased to lexicalise those relations that are less predictable from the objects involved. I will also outline plans for future work investigating the cumulative effect of these biases as languages are transmitted from person to person, with the goal of offering one possible explanation for the origin of relational word meanings.