

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

Saturday, February 4, 2023. 11 AM - 12 PM (EST)

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Recruiting syntax (and more) to learn the meaning of adjectives

Abstract

Adjectives present a unique challenge to word learners. On the one hand, the properties they pick out in the world are not always stable, are open to different perspectives, do not have a physical correlate, or are dependent on the context. Consider adjectives like *full*, *pretty*, *curious*, *happy*, or *tall*. On the other, the locations in which they occur in the speech stream are shared by other words. For example, determiners like *the*, quantifiers like *every*, quantity-denoting terms *several*, and number words all appear preminally. And both adjectives and verbs can follow a copula (*she is happy/smiling*). In English, adjectives do not host grammatical gender or number marking, which may complicate the learning process in that the connection with a noun is not explicitly signaled, but at the same time, one could argue that languages in which there is obligatory morphosyntactic agreement place additional burden on the language learner. For these reasons and others, adjectives are not among the first words produced. However, when they *do* enter into the lexicon months afterwards, they appear *en masse*, and many of the earliest adjectival productions are those that have intrigued semanticists over the years. Given these complexities, how then, do children acquire adjectives? In this talk, I'll see how far the syntactic structure can take us, and then pair these surface-level distributional patterns with semantics of co-occurring words and other linguistic and extralinguistic factors, to begin to pin down what it takes for a child to learn adjectives.

Date & Time: February 4, 2023 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

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Kristen Syrett is an Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics and the Center for Cognitive Science (RuCCS) at Rutgers University. She is the Director of the Rutgers Laboratory for Developmental Language Studies, co-Director of the Language and Social Justice Initiative, and an Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education. Her NSF-funded research investigates how children acquire word meaning and her experimental semantics and pragmatics research focuses on how we dynamically assign meaning in a discourse context. She has been featured in the media as an expert on diversity, gender, and inclusive language.

For more information about our speaker, click on the link below:

<https://sites.rutgers.edu/language-studies/>

You can also follow her on **Twitter** @kristennsyrett