

The acquisition of meaning: Evidentiality in semantics and cognition

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How do semantics and cognition make contact during language learning? This talk addresses this question by investigating the acquisition of evidentiality (the linguistic encoding of information source) and its relation to children's evidential reasoning. I present data from a series of experimental studies with children learning Turkish and Korean (two languages with evidential morphology) and English (a language without grammaticalized evidentiality) in order to test two hypotheses: (a) the acquisition of evidentiality is complicated by the subtleness and abstractness of the underlying concepts; (b) learning a language which systematically (e.g., grammatically) marks evidential categories might affect early reasoning about sources of information. The experiments show that the production and comprehension of grammaticalized evidentials can pose considerable difficulty to young learners; nevertheless, these problems are not (necessarily) conceptual in nature since the same learners successfully reason about sources of information in non-linguistic tasks. Furthermore, children's ability to reason about sources of information proceeds along similar lines in diverse language-learning populations and is not tied to the acquisition of the linguistic markers of evidentiality in the exposure language. I discuss implications of these findings for the relationship between linguistic-semantic and conceptual representations during development.