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12:00 pm – 1:30 pm

Definitely maybe: modal language and reasoning in 2-year-olds

Abstract:

I'll discuss recent and ongoing studies on epistemic adverbs (e.g., *maybe, probably*). On the basis of corpus work, I'll show that young children reliably and robustly produce adult-like epistemic adverbs from earliest modal productions. These occur during individual children's Epistemic Gaps: the time when modal verbs (e.g., *must, could*) occur with only their root meanings. Early epistemic adverb uses modify propositions, and occur in a variety of sentential positions, with both internal (i.e., inner state) and external main predicates. These production facts for epistemic adverbs, along with controls for input attestation and potential sampling biases, allow us to reject longstanding explanations for root-before-epistemic modal language use that appeal to conceptual changes in the developing child (Stephany, 1979; Sweetser, 1990; Papafragou, 1998; Dack & Astington 2011; i.a.). And, these results are consistent with current appreciation of toddler epistemic reasoning abilities (Onishi & Baillargeon, 2005; Goupil et al., 2016; i.a.).

I argue that epistemic uses of modal verbs are observed relatively late because they are likely hard to learn. Modal verbs are polysemous (one-to-many form-meaning mappings), involve greater syntactic representational complexity in their epistemic uses (e.g., Ross 1967, Roberts 1985, Brennan 1993), and are less frequently represented as epistemic in the input (e.g., Shatz & Wellman, 1990; van Dooren et al., 2017, 2019). Adverbs – syntactic adjuncts with typically one-to-one form-meaning mapping – give children the best shot at detecting and using early epistemic language.

What about the possibility dimension encoded by *maybe* (modal force)? I will also briefly present an ongoing eye-tracking study showing that 2-year-olds appear to process *maybe* modal sentences like affirmative counterparts (in line with Leahy & Carey, 2020's "minimal representations of possibility"). I'll conclude by drawing on both the naturalistic and experimental work to speculate on how children may use epistemic adverbs as a "way-in" to learning adult-like possibility representations ("modal representations of possibility") and modal verb polysemy (e.g., *must* has epistemic meanings in addition to root).