

GSAS - Harvard Linguistics Department
Universals Workshop
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Friday, November 17, 3:30-5:00 PM
Boylston Hall 105

Learning what 'must' and 'can' must and can mean

The way languages across the world express modality shows both variation and convergence.

In some languages, like English, the same modal words (e.g., must) can express different flavors of modality: “Jo must eat fish”, for instance, can express a likelihood that Jo is a fish eater (‘epistemic’ necessity) or an obligation Jo has to eat fish (‘deontic’

necessity). In other languages, modals are strictly monosemous. How do children figure out the modals of their language? What expectations, if any, do they bring to this learning problem? This talk focuses on English-learning children, and asks how they figure

out that their modals can be used to express different flavors, what in their linguistic experience might give away modal polysemy, and what linguistic biases might guide this acquisition process.