



Department of
Linguistics and Modern Languages
語言學及現代語言系

How do Young Children “Decipher” the Meanings of “Tough Words”?

Linguistics Seminars

Dr. Angela Xiaoxue HE

University of Southern California



Date: March 12, 2019 (Tuesday)

Time: 16:30 – 18:15

Venue: Swire Hall One, Fung King Hey Building,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Word learning is a challenging task for any word form is compatible with an infinite number of possible meanings (Quine, 1960; Chomsky, 1959). Yet young children manage to solve the word meaning “puzzle” quite effortlessly and build up a lexicon quickly. I examine the mechanisms underlying successful word learning. Most word learning research has focused on nouns that label objects, but my work focuses on words whose referents are much less transparent and therefore more difficult to acquire—verbs, event nominals (nouns that denote event concepts), and pronouns, for example. I take an interactive, dynamic and developmental view to study how language learning interacts with other maturing functions of the brain—e.g., conceptual, cognitive, and social-communicative. In this talk, I discuss five studies along three lines. *First*, learners bring with them some expectations about the relations between language and concept; I examine to what extent these expectations are helpful (Study 1) and in what ways they are limited (Study 2). *Second*, I investigate the role certain cognitive abilities play in word learning—for example, processing abilities (Study 3) and memory (Study 4). Last but not least, I look at the role of social-communicative abilities (such as gaze following) in word learning, using children with ASD’s pronoun acquisition as a test case.

Speaker

Angela Xiaoxue received her BA in Linguistics from CUHK in 2009. She then went to the University of Maryland and received her PhD in Linguistics in 2015, specializing in first language acquisition. After graduation, she worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences at Boston University, studying language development in both typically-developing children and children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). She is currently affiliated with the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Linguistics at the University of Southern California, working on an NSF project on how adults interpret meanings of words and sentences and how little learners acquire these meanings. Most of her work on language acquisition investigates how young learners “decipher” the meanings of novel words, especially words whose referents are less transparent (e.g. verbs, abstract nouns, pronouns, comparative words like “more”). She is broadly interested in studying human cognition using language as a window and aims to bring together multi-disciplinary perspectives to inform her work on language acquisition.

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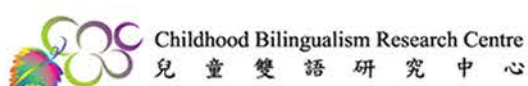
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