

# LING5702: Lecture Notes 23

## Acquisition of Meaning

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### 23.1 Acquisition of Semantics

Semantic acquisition presents a major challenge ...

Quine (1960): A rabbit hops by; your companion says '*Gavagai!*'

- may mean '*Rabbit!*' — species
- may mean '*Animal!*' — general class (kingdom)
- may mean '*American Fuzzy Lop!*' — specific class (breed)
- may mean '*Peter!*' — proper name
- may mean '*Edible!*' — purpose class
- may mean '*Female!*' — gender class
- may mean '*Ears!*' — sub-part
- may mean '*Bucolic scene!*' — super-part
- may mean '*Hopping!*' — eventuality involving rabbit
- may mean '*Hunting!*' — eventuality involving speaker

With all this ambiguity, how does child learn meaning?

### 23.2 Syntactic Bootstrapping

Brown (1957): kids use syntactic categories to guide word learning

- **subjects:** 3- to 5-year-old children
- **stimuli:** someone kneading dough / cutting cloth / ..., followed by:
  - (a) '*show me the sib*' (count noun form, following '*the*')
  - (b) '*show me some sib*' (mass noun form, following '*some*')
  - (c) '*show me sibbing*' (gerund form, with suffix '*-ing*')
- **measure:** what subjects pointed to

- **results:**

- (a) *'show me the sib'* — subjects indicate bowl/knife
- (b) *'show me some sib'* — subjects indicate dough/cloth
- (c) *'show me sipping'* — subjects make kneading/cutting gesture

Brown thought these vary across languages (e.g. no count/mass distinction).

Yuan & Fisher (2009): extend Brown results to syntax

- **subjects:** 2-year-old children
- **stimuli:** recorded sentence:

- (a) *'She blicked!'* (intransitive)
- (b) *'She blicked her!'* (transitive)

followed by images of person raising arm, pulling another person's leg

followed by request: *'Can you show me blicking?'*

- **measure:** what subjects pointed to
- **results:**
  - (a) *'She blicked!'* — person raising arm
  - (b) *'She blicked her!'* — person pulling another person's leg

Pinker (1994): problems with syntactic bootstrapping

- children may have instinct for semantic frame

## References

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