

Parsing to learn: How the demands of real-time language comprehension shape word and grammar learning

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It is now well established that language learners, much like their expert fluent counterparts, attempt to interpret speech in real-time, rapidly assigning meaning as words and phrases are heard in the input. It is also true, however, that language learners have a distinct inability to “go offline” when their initial interpretive commitments lead them astray, such as when they initially pursue the unintended meaning of an ambiguous word or phrase (the so-called “kindergarten-path” effect). In this talk, I’ll present experiments that explore the implications that these two observations have for word and grammar learning. The findings suggest that linguistic evidence about the meaning of a sentence is more easily acquired when it permits the prediction, rather than the revision, of structure. I’ll also argue that this learning pattern very likely constrains the types of grammars we tend to see in human natural language.