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Pragmatics, cognition and development

In this talk I explore the origins and development of pragmatic competence taking conversational implicatures as a case study. Children, unlike adults, often accept logically true but underinformative statements (*Some Bs Y* when all Bs Y), thereby appearing oblivious to conversational inferences. I present a series of studies that seek to explain this pattern. I show that children's pragmatic difficulties are linked to the difficulty of accessing relevant lexical alternatives during the computation of pragmatic inferences; a further source of difficulty lies in assessing the speaker's epistemic state during the calculation of pragmatic inferences. These findings point to both early successes and limitations in the development of pragmatic abilities.