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Understanding the cross-linguistic distribution of person systems: A behavioural perspective

Systems of personal pronouns (e.g.,'you' and 'I') are used to refer to individuals as a function of their role in the context of utterance (e.g., speaker, addressee). While these systems vary widely across languages, not all ways of partitioning the person space are equally likely cross-linguistically. What are the forces that give rise to this constrained variation?

In the first part of the talk, I will present a series of artificial language learning experiments that investigate learning biases in how we represent the person space. Our results suggest that learners prefer person systems which (a) are based on natural classes, and (b) keep distinct forms to refer to the speaker. We take this to suggest natural class-based similarity and speaker-distinctiveness as two independent forces influencing the learnability of person systems.

In the second part of the talk, I will present some new work where I explore the idea that some of these constraints on person systems (i.e., the two independent forces mentioned above) are grounded on language-independent representations of pronominal referents, and available to speakers in non-linguistic tasks.

I will finish by showing how a similar approach can be extended to investigate the cross-linguistic distribution of other indexical expressions, such as locatives (e.g. here, there).