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Perceiving transitivity: Consequences for verb learning

Clause transitivity plays an important role in verb learning: infants can use a verb's distribution in transitive and intransitive clauses to draw inferences about its meaning (e.g. Fisher et al., 2010) and its argument-taking properties (Lidz, White, & Baier, 2017). In this talk I'll discuss two questions concerning the nature of these inferences. First, are infants' inferences about verb meaning best characterized as one-to-one matching between arguments in a clause, and participant-roles in the event-concept expressed by the clause (Naigles, 1990; Fisher et. al, 2010)? To differentiate this participant-to-argument matching hypothesis from other possibilities, we investigate whether children think an intransitive clause could be a good fit for a two-participant event. Second, at early stages in development, infants may not recognize transitivity in certain 'non-basic' clauses, like "What did Amy fix"? (Gagliardi, Mease, & Lidz, 2016). If a learner does not yet recognize that *what* stands for the object of *fix*, might she erroneously infer that *fix* does not require an object? We probe when infants are able to recognize the transitivity of non-basic clauses like wh-object questions, and how infants who do not yet have that ability might learn to 'filter' non-basic clauses from the data they use for verb learning.