

Learning socio-indexical features of words

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People who speak the same language differ in what words they use and also in their pronunciation patterns. Some of these differences become conventionalised as socio-indexical, permitting listeners to make social inferences about the speaker while also grasping the content of what the speaker is saying. This situation points to cognitive processes whereby people can learn social associations for words and pronunciation patterns, and propensities to imitate others engender groups sharing linguistic behaviours. But the propensities to imitate others must be limited, as otherwise the lexical choices and speech patterns would become completely homogenised within any given speech community.

In this talk, I will review a series of experimental studies about the power and limitations of socio-indexical learning. These studies indicate that: — Indexical associations for words, morphological patterns, and allophonic patterns are all quite learnable. — Categorical patterns can be learned with a remarkably small number of trials. Learning such patterns is much faster than learning gradient phonetic patterns. — Only a subset of the available statistical associations are learned. Contextual relevance shapes learning by affecting what examples are remembered and how generalisations are formed. -- "Contextual relevance" derives both from widely shared assumptions about how language works, and from individual social identities.