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Proposal for an oral paper

Learning words from context

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In the early stages of language acquisition, children acquire the basic, most frequent words of their language in face-to-face contexts in which there is abundant non-linguistic information which enables them to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. From middle childhood onwards, however, most words are learned from written texts. This raises an interesting learnability issue: since the referent is not present when the learner encounters a new word, how does he/she work out what the word means? In this talk, I argue that the main source of evidence about the meaning of non-basic relational words are their collocational patterns, i.e. the words that they typically co-occurs with in texts. I show that speakers have very detailed knowledge of collocations, even for relatively infrequent words, and that this knowledge is strongly correlated with knowledge about meaning.