Seminar Series #13

Infants' capacity to learn non-adjacent dependencies in speech and other sequential stimuli

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Host: Reiko Mazuka
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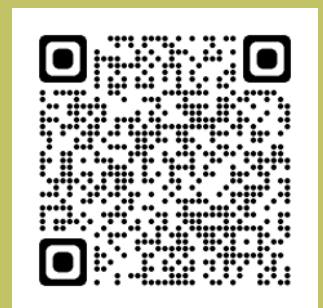JEWEL Project Principal Investigator

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Admission: Free

Registration site ↓

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The ability to detect non-adjacent dependencies (NADs) in language, such as the dependency in English between the auxiliary 'is' and the present progressive marker '-ing' in 'the baker is baking bread,' could be extremely useful for acquiring a language. It would provide the learner with information about which grammatical elements participate in the dependencies and would provide a cue to constituency and hierarchical structure. Yet published behavioral findings contain little evidence that children detect NADs before 15 months of age, and in particular, prior studies with 12-month-olds have failed to find unequivocal evidence of learning. Yet we know that infants have started to learn about a variety of syntactic patterns at this age. In this talk, I will present several lines of research from my lab that attempt to better understand the stimulus properties that influence human NAD learning. These include findings from studies with adults as well as with infants, and studies that include visual sequential stimuli as well as speech. I will end by presenting some recent findings that point to the influence of language experience on 12-month-old infants' ability to learn NADs in speech, and I will propose a framework for thinking about NAD learning that unifies the wide range of findings.