Children's use argument structure, meta-knowledge of the lexicon, and extra-linguistic contextual cues in inferring meanings of novel verbs

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Verbs are the centerpiece of the sentence, and understanding of verb meanings is essential for language acquisition. Yet verb learning is said to be more challenging than noun learning for young children for several reasons. First, while nouns tend to denote concrete objects, which are perceptually stable over time, verbs tend to refer to action events, which are temporally ephemeral, and the beginning and the end of the action referred to by the verb are not clearly specified. Second, a verb takes nouns as arguments, and the meaning of a verb is determined as the relation between the arguments. To infer the meaning of a verb, children need to attend to the relation between the objects in the event rather than the objects themselves. In so doing, children make use of a variety of cues such as argument structure, meta-knowledge of the lexicon, and extra-linguistic contextual cues. In this talk, I present my recent cross-linguistic research examining how Japanese-, English-, German-, and Chinese-speaking children utilize these cues when inferring novel verb meanings, and discuss how language-specific linguistic properties influence the use of these cues.