How do we learn about the world?

In order to learn about the world through language, we need to be able to distinguish between transparent and non-transparent language use.

**Transparent language**
Indented meaning corresponds directly to what has been said

*Boys like football [like(boys,football)]*

**Non-transparent language**
Intention behind an utterance does not clearly map onto the form used and the addressee must infer additional meaning.

*Boys like football*  
*Girls don’t like football*

**Conversational expectations**

Language use and comprehension is governed by interlocutors’ expectations about how communicative interactions should proceed (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 2000).

- Be truthful
- Be relevant
- What is not said is the obvious
- Be informative
- Be brief
- What is said abnormally is not normal

When an utterance fails to meet these expectations we draw inferences.

* I ate some of the cookies  
* Not all of the cookies
* My soup is warm  
* Not hot
* Pass me the blue blueberry  
* There’s a non-blue blueberry
* John went to restaurant and  
* John doesn’t usually eat at restaurants
* Charlie stopped the car  
* The car was stopped in a non-standard manner

**Informativity inferences**

When knowledgeable speakers produce trivial utterances (neither blatantly underinformative nor explicitly overinformative), addressees are licensed to derive informativity-based inferences.

1. “The library walls are blue”
   a) The situation has changed
   b) The walls used to be different

**Why utter (1)?**
To inform an addressee about the current state of the world? The triviality of (1) may invite the addressee to reason about why a speaker chose to produce such a trivial utterance.

**What were the speaker’s goals and intentions?**
Is there something new? Has something changed?

**Speaker knowledge** is a key factor in deriving inferences. Greater rates of inferencing from knowledgeable speakers (Rees, Reksnes, & Rohde, preprint; Rees & Rohde, 2023).

**Children’s expectations**

Fewer inferences from unknowledgeable or unreliable speakers (Moty & Rhodes, 2022; Tomasello & Akhtar, 1995).

Expect informative utterances (Morisseau, Davies, & Matthews, 2015; Bannard, Rosner, & Matthews, 2017).

**Research questions**

- Do children recognise additional meaning via informativity inferences?
  “I have a belly button”  
  “Tigers have stripes”
- How do children use speaker knowledge to interpret trivial utterances?

**What was the situation like several months ago? Same or different?**

| School (familiar) | I saw that the library walls are blue. |
| Field trip to Prime Minister’s office (unfamiliar) | I saw that the soap in the bathroom is pink. |

**Same: Transparent**
Nothing changed

**Different: Non-transparent**
Infer something changed

**Preliminary results**

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PM = .47  
School = .54

**Children show sensitivity to informativity biases**
Younger children compare with their own knowledge (“Mine is not like that”)  
Older children draw informativity inferences and base these on speaker knowledge.

**Selected References**