

The rise and fall of analogical aspects of meaning in language creation

The emergence of language provides an opportunity to observe how language form and structure arise. Here we consider the case of Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL), a young, urban sign language that emerged from within a community of children brought together in an educational setting in the 1970s. Originating in gestural communication among 50 children, NSL is a rich, natural language with over 1500 users today. Using an apparent-time approach, we follow the emergence of NSL to see how language learning, iterated over multiple cohorts of learners, can generate language structure. Since NSL arose over the past five decades, members of different sequential age cohorts represent a stratified, living record of the changes that took place with each new generation.

In this presentation, we will examine the boundary between analog and categorical representations by observing their emergence and conventionalization. Analog representations take advantage of the precision available with gesture, capturing, for example, the relative distance between two adjacent objects. Categorical representations capture commonalities across several tokens of similar relations, for example, all instances of adjacency being labeled *beside*. An open question is how categorical representations emerge in a sign language, whether they originate in analogical forms, and why such a change might take place.

Based on data from studies of pointing, expressions for spatial relations, and iconically motivated signs, I will suggest that the more specific analogical forms emerged early among the language's initial users. As the language was acquired by new cohorts of children, the learners may have generalized across these analogical forms to arrive at categorical constructions. Though the categorical forms may have originated as analogical forms, they have not displaced them. Today's younger signers use both systems in parallel, leveraging both analogical and categorical forms to capture different aspects of meaning.