

**Accessibility and emergent generalizations:  
how uncles and aunts became aunts and uncles**

There are times when a curiously odd relic of language presents us with a thread, which when pulled, reveals deep and general facts about human language. This presentation unspools such a case. Prior to 1930, English speakers uniformly preferred male-before-female word order in conjoined nouns such as uncles and aunts; nephews and nieces; men and women. Since then, at least a half dozen items have systematically reversed their preferred order (e.g., aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews) while others have not (men and women). I will present evidence that three simple aspects of cognitive accessibility predict the word order of both familiar and novel A&B noun combinations generally, as well as the historical change focused on here: 1) the relative accessibility of the A and B terms individually, 2) competition from B&A order, and critically, 3) neighborhood strength (i.e., similarity to related A' & B' cases).