Alternatives in word learning

The meaning and use of a linguistic expression S is often determined in part by properties of its alternatives, unpronounced linguistic objects that relate in specific ways to S. In this talk, I will discuss two case studies illustrating how alternative-sensitive computations interact with lexical acquisition. First, I will offer a new theory of the well-established mutual exclusivity inference in novel noun learning (joint work with Gabor Brody & Roman Feiman). I will suggest that children derive the inference by reasoning over alternatives invoked by information-structural markers (instead of learning biases, as universally assumed in the literature). Second, I will show how we can use theories of alternative-sensitive computations to predict when lexical acquisition might be hard (joint work with Frank Staniszewski & Rachel Stacey). Focusing on the domain of modal verbs (have to, is allowed to), I suggest that specific failures in children's behavior with such expressions result from them entertaining a non-adult set of alternatives.

Click here to see the colloquium program.