Word by word: Experimental investigations in the acquisition of the lexicon
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Children typically begin producing their first words around age one. Multiword utterances follow some months later, around 18-24 months of age. At this point, most children have an expressive vocabulary of anywhere between 75 and 500 words (quite a range), and a receptive vocabulary of 300-900 words. Although many (if not most) of these words are nouns, children are of course also acquiring other lexical items, such as adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. As these new words are acquired, their semantic representations not only help to shape expectations for subcategories within these lexical categories, but also for the meaning assigned to new phonological forms that are encountered in the context of these words.

In this talk, I will present results from a series of word learning studies demonstrating that the acquisition of certain words into the lexicon helps to constrain the hypothesis space for the meaning of newly-encountered words, but at the same time demonstrating that there are limits to this process. What's more, at times the directionality of this process may seem counterintuitive, knowing what we do about the order of acquisition of certain grammatical categories. Together, these studies shed light not only on the semantic representations young children are acquiring when they learn words, but also how this semantic information feeds into the language acquisition process as children determine new form-meaning pairings.