



## Linguistics Colloquium

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**“Context-sensitivity and count nouns:  
the view from child language ”**

**Thursday, October 4, 2018 @ 5:30 pm  
in SAR (635 Comm. Ave.) room 101**



### **Abstract:**

Part of what it means to become a proficient language user is to recognize the ways in which the conversational context affects the way we arrive at certain interpretations. This seems entirely reasonable for context-dependent expressions like pronouns (they) or relative gradable adjectives (big, expensive), but what about seemingly stable expressions, such as count nouns (fork, ball)? Are words like these—words that appear early in child-directed and child-produced speech—also sensitive to context? We investigate this question by examining children's and adult's categorization of partial objects as referents of count nouns. We start with a curious yet robust observation that young children, when presented with a set of partial and whole objects (like forks) and asked to count or quantify them, appear to treat partial and whole objects on par. This finding, first reported in Shipley & Shepperson (1990), seems to indicate a conceptual shift in development in the treatment of count nouns and their corresponding sortals. We adopt a different perspective, entertaining the possibility that children are doing something that adults might indeed be willing to do in certain instances, and that their response patterns reveal something interesting about the context sensitivity and vagueness inherent to nominals.

(Joint research with Kristen Syrett, Rutgers University)

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