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Aspects of semantic change and how they interact with lexical acquisition

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Abstract

Words that are learned early were shown to be semantically more stable, and vice versa (Cassani et al. 2021, Cognitive Science). Semantic change, however, has multiple aspects. In this diachronic corpus study, we examine the relationship between the age of acquisition (AoA) of words and a set of different measures of semantic change: change in a word's polysemy; overall semantic displacement; and average extent of semantic fluctuation. All measures are based on diachronically layered sense distributions (Hu et al. 2019, ACL) derived from the Corpus of Historical American English. AoA is taken from Kuperman et al. (2012, Behav. Res. Meth.). Taking interactions with frequency into account, we show that semantic displacement and fluctuation are positively associated with AoA as expected. Early acquisition is associated with an increase in polysemy. This hints at the relevance of semantic (metaphorical) extension in the early acquisition of the lexicon.