Putting the cross into crosslinguistic research: Focusing on the similarities, not the differences (Ben Ambridge, University of Manchester)

Many accounts of child language acquisition are designed to explain findings from only a single language (most often English), and struggle to explain the acquisition of other languages. Studies that do include more than one language often focus on differences rather than similarities, potentially hampering progress towards our overarching goal of explaining how children are able to learn any language. This talk focusses on explicitly cross-linguistic research, which involves running more-or-less the same study across different languages, with the goal of uncovering acquisition mechanisms that are language-general.

First, I will summarize almost-identical adult and child grammaticality judgment studies of causatives across English, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, K'iche' Mayan, Balinese and Arabic. The relative acceptability of more- vs less-transparent causative forms (e.g., He broke the stick vs He made the stick break) is predicted by verb semantics; the extent to which the caused and causing event merge into one.

Second, I will describe a new meta-analysis of comprehension studies that investigate children's knowledge of case-marking and word-order (e.g., that The dog+ACCUSATIVE chased the cat+NOMINATIVE means 'the cat chased the dog', not vice-versa) across 18 languages. The developmental pattern of errors is simulated by a simple computational model that learns to discriminate cues to AGENT/PATIENThood.

Third I will summarize several studies of inflectional noun and verb morphology, mainly across Polish, Finnish and Estonian, but with some brief excursions into Lithuanian and Japanese. Across all of these languages, children's errors pattern according to word-form frequency and (where studied) phonological neighbourhood density.