Bootstrapping into Attitudes

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This talk explores two classic problems at the semantics-pragmatics interface from a learner's perspective. First, the meaning that speakers convey often goes beyond the literal meaning of the sentences they utter. Second, not all content encoded in utterances has equal standing: some is foregrounded, some backgrounded. Yet a sentence does not formally distinguish what a speaker asserts from what she presupposes or merely implicates. For this reason, the child acquiring a language has a daunting task. She must both extract the literal meaning from the overall message, and separate the background assumptions that are linguistically required from those that are incidental. I will discuss, through a few case studies on children's acquisition of attitudes, the ways in which the syntax might guide the child with this daunting task.