First steps to understanding the acquisition of rare and changing sounds: The case of the Nepali 4-way contrast

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The majority of studies on child language acquisition has been based on a small minority of the languages of the world. This limits our understanding of how language acquisition is impacted by language-internal factors (such as phonological markedness) as well as societal factors (such as the family structure in which children grow up). I hope to do my part in filling this gap, by studying the acquisition of the cross-linguistically rare four-way voicing contrast in Nepali.

In this seminar, I will outline the first steps in this direction, based on our lab’s recent acoustic-phonetic and simulation-based research on Nepali infant-directed speech, which provides evidence that the input to Nepali-learning children does everything but support acquisition of the four-way voicing contrast. The implications for phonological change as well as the acquisition of Nepali are discussed. Moreover, I’m looking forward to a discussion about the next steps in this research agenda.