VARIATION THEME:
How do children learn languages with different structures and in different cultural environments?

LuCiD
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INTRODUCTION

All children bring the same set of learning mechanisms to the language-learning task. However, these mechanisms have to be flexible enough to learn any of the world's languages in any of a wide range of socio-cultural environments. We will be studying 6 different languages and 4 different contexts in which babies grow up.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF INTERACTING WITH INFANTS

Across the world there are similarities and differences in the ways different cultures play and interact with infants (e.g. how they talk to babies; how much they play with them). Is this also the case for groups in the UK? We are looking at mother-infant interaction in families that speak Bangladeshi, Cantonese, Mandarin and English at home and at the children's early language development.
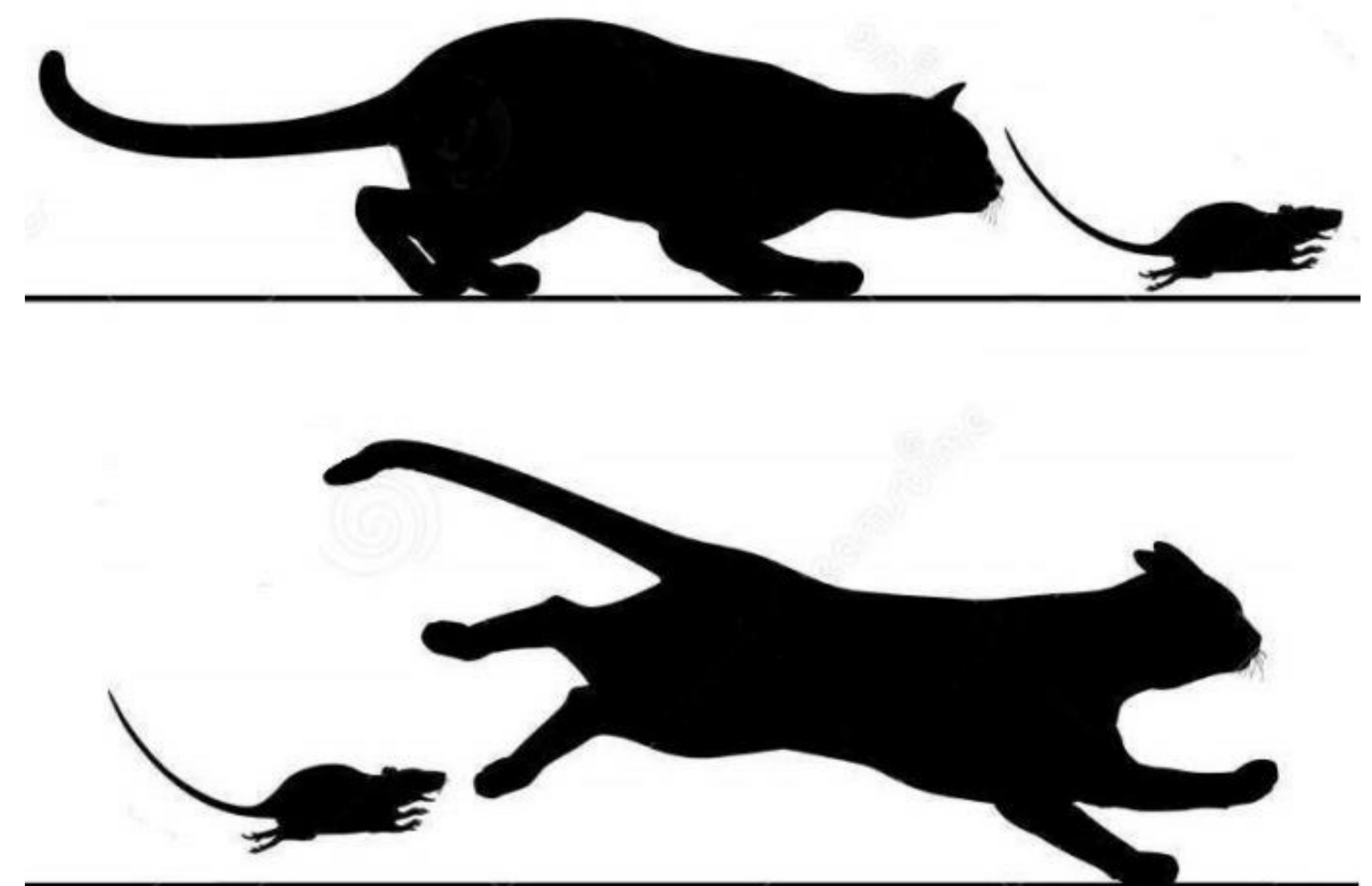
LEARNING HOW TO SAY 'WHO DOES WHAT TO WHOM' IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

In English, the agent usually comes first and the patient after the verb. Thus: *The cat chased the mouse* means something very different to *The mouse chased the cat*. But this is not true for many other languages. This project will explore how children work these roles out across 3 languages with very different word orders.

LEARNING WHAT'S A NOUN AND WHAT'S A VERB IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Some languages, like English, have very rigid word order. This makes learning what is a noun and what is a verb easier. But many other languages are much more flexible with word order. This project will use naturally recorded caretaker speech in 4 languages (Polish, Finnish, Chintang and English) to model how categories of nouns and verbs might be extracted.

IMPACT

We will be able to
(a) Advise health professionals about the effect of the structure of different languages on the profile of children's language learning
(b) Provide detailed advice to early years educators about the challenges that face children whose home language is not English, or who are learning language in different socio-cultural environments.

Image (top) courtesy of MD. Hasibul Haque Sakib and (bottom) courtesy of Ran Phang

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