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Using eye tracking to examine verb learning in the midst of distractions

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Abstract

Verbs are central to the syntactic structure of sentences. Children can compare multiple events during verb learning, and this comparison can help them learn and extend new verbs (e.g., Haryu, Imai & Okada, 2011). To test whether adults use a similar comparison process, a Tobii x30 eye tracker recorded adults' eye movements while they watched dynamic scenes with novel events, and heard new verbs. Some scenes were relevant to the new verb and some were not. We predicted that as adults compared events, they could deduce over trials that some events were irrelevant, and reduce their visual attention to them. Results show that when learning trials started with a relevant event, adults did look longer at relevant vs. irrelevant events. However, when the first learning trial was irrelevant, they looked equally at the events. The study will be discussed in relation to current theories of verb acquisition.