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Feature distinctiveness in verbs: links between verb distinctiveness, child directed speech and age of acquisition

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Abstract: Feature distinctiveness is a measure representing the uniqueness of objects' features. Previous research found links between noun feature distinctiveness and age of acquisition (i.e. nouns referring to objects with relatively unique features are learned earlier). The present work investigates the links between feature distinctiveness and age of acquisition in verbs. Using high-dimensional vector space modelling, noun and verb feature distinctiveness was represented as Manhattan distance between word nodes. Both nouns and verbs showed negative correlations between feature distinctiveness and age of acquisition (words of more distinctive objects learned earlier), suggesting a general distinctiveness bias. This effect was stronger for nouns. An investigation of child directed speech (CDS) from the CHILDES corpus showed a correlation between child directed word frequency and feature distinctiveness for nouns (featurally distinctive nouns are more common in CDS), but not for verbs. The possible link between distinctiveness in CDS and age of acquisition effects is discussed.