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Language acquisition and the onset of relational reasoning in infants

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Abstract: Recent research suggests that the ability to infer the abstract, relational concepts "same" and "different" in a causal learning task is in place as early as 18 months (Walker & Gopnik, 2013). Here we address whether infants' developing linguistic abilities play a role in the acquisition of these concepts. Researchers have long proposed a close relationship between semantic and cognitive development, and a variety of connections have been found between specific linguistic and conceptual achievements. In the current study, we examine 14- and 15-month olds' relational inferences in a causal match-to-sample task, and assess performance as a function of relational word production. Infants' use of relational words such as "more" was correlated with their success on this task after controlling for general language abilities. Findings strengthen the claim that relational reasoning is early developing, and provide evidence that abstract concepts are reflected in and linked to specific linguistic representations.