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The Key is Comparison: How Children Learn Verbs When Confronted with Referential Ambiguity

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Abstract

Verb learning is a difficult, important task for young learners (e.g., Childers & Tomasello, 2002). Children often see different events while hearing new verbs and have to deduce which event is relevant for learning that verb's meaning. We simulated this experience by showing 3 ½- and 4 ½-year-olds (n= 28) 3 events on each trial and presenting a new verb. Across 3 trials, 3- and 4-year-olds were able to focus on the repeated action and extend the verb (ps <.05). In Study 2, the same-aged children (n=50 to date) were shown a repeated agent across trials (facilitating structural alignment), six learning trials (more instances for statistical learning), or both a repeated agent and six learning trials. Analyses of the first two conditions suggest a difference between conditions; data collection in progress. These studies are important for understanding cognitive processes that may underlie a key task, verb learning.