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New exposure, no constraints: Semantic restrictions on novel nouns do not constrain adults' subsequent referent selections

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Abstract

Children and adults use linguistic context to learn new words. For instance, in "She wears the dax," "dax" likely refers to clothing. We asked whether learners retain these constraints across ambiguous word-learning exposures. Adults (n=139) learned 12 words. On Exposure 1, novel nouns were presented as the object of either Restrictive (e.g., "wears") or Non-restrictive ("finds") verbs. Participants selected which of two compatible referents the noun referred to. On Exposure 2, participants heard each noun again and chose between a distractor referent and the unselected referent from Exposure 1—now the only referent compatible with the previous Restrictive verb. If adults retain selectional restrictions, then Restrictive verbs should increase selection of the compatible referent. However, we found no difference between Restrictive (M=.74, SD=.26) and Non-restrictive (M=.76, SD=.24) conditions, p=.24. This suggests adults use verbs' selectional restrictions to identify referents in the moment but do not retain these restrictions across exposures.