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Distributional Information in Speech to Children: Nouns Come First

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Abstract

One proposal for how children acquire lexical categories is on the basis of their distributional signatures. Given that the language children are exposed to gradually changes as they get older, it is possible that such changes impact the quality of distributional information, and therefore the efficiency with which lexical categories are acquired. To test this idea, we compiled a corpus of American-English child-directed speech and ordered it by increasing age of the target child. Next, we investigated the quality of distributional cues about lexical category membership in the first and second half of the age-ordered corpus. As predicted, we found that the quality of distributional information co-varies with age of the target child. Specifically, we found that distributional evidence for the noun category was of higher quality in speech to younger compared to older children. In light of these findings, we recommend that distributional accounts of lexical category acquisition take into consideration language change during the first six years of development.