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Characterizing the relationship between lexical and morphological development

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Abstract

In learning morphology, do children generalize from their vocabularies on an item-by-item basis, or do they form global rules on a developmental timetable? We use large-scale parent-report data to address this question by investigating relations among morphological development, vocabulary growth, and age. For three languages, we examine irregular verbs (e.g. go) and predict childrens correct inflection (went) and overregularization (goed/wented). Morphology knowledge relates strongly to vocabulary, more so than to age. Further, this relation is modulated by age: for two children with the same vocabulary size, the older is more likely to correctly inflect and overregularize, and the effect of vocabulary on morphology decreases with age. Lastly, correct inflection and overregularization rates rise in tandem over age, and vocabulary effects on them are correlated across items. Our findings support that morphology learning is strongly coupled to lexical learning and that correct inflection and overregularization are related, verb-specific, processes.