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Partial Verb Learning via Observational Contexts

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Abstract

Children learn nouns more readily than verbs in early development. Research on candidate explanations for this noun advantage has suggested that, while noun meanings can be easily gleaned from their observational contexts, verb meanings require access to their syntactic constructions, which remain inaccessible until later in development (Gentner, 2006; McDonough et al., 2011; Piccin & Waxman, 2007). This study asks whether previous demonstrations of tenuous verb learning from their observational contexts are partly due to the assessment method. In an adapted version of the Human Simulation Paradigm (HSP; Gillette et al., 1999), we assessed verb learning using multiple tasks. When verb learning was assessed via a free-response task, learning was minimal, replicating the challenge of learning precise verb meanings via observational contexts. The findings from both a categorization and semantic similarity task, however, suggest that learners do acquire partial knowledge of both action and mental verbs via their observational contexts.