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Revisiting the Role of Observational Contexts for Learning Hard Nouns

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Abstract

Children learn words that name objects (“ball”) and those that name abstract concepts (“story”). One view of learning is that different inputs matter for different words (Snedeker & Gleitman, 2004). That is, many argue that although the observational contexts in which words occur are sufficient for learning object names, they are not for learning abstract “hard words” (Gleitman et al., 2005). This study revisited the contributions of observational contexts to learning one type of hard word: nouns denoting non-basic level object categories (“hard nouns” like “friend”; Kako, 2005). In a new artificial learning paradigm, we reveal that although observational contexts were insufficient for full hard noun learning, they afforded learners partial knowledge that allowed them to succeed in some learning tasks. These data highlight how observational contexts may lay the foundation for learning hard nouns, and underscore how definitions of learning impact our understanding of how the input shapes it.