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Sixteen-month-olds understand the link between words and mental representations of their referents without contextual support

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Abstract

A proto-understanding of absent reference (reference to absent entities) emerges around 12 months provided with rich contextual support, infants look and point to the location of a displaced object. When can infants understand absent reference without contextual support? We modified the procedure from Hendrickson and Sundara (2017) who showed that with very minimal pre-exposure and no demonstration of referent displacement, 14-month-olds identify absent referents of familiar words. Fourteen- and 16-month-olds first listened to passages containing target words, while viewing a checkerboard. Then, two objects the referent and a distractor appeared on the screen. We analyzed infants' looking to the target during 3 seconds from the onset of image display. Only 16-month-olds looked significantly above chance, suggesting that listening to the passages activated their representations of the referents. These results are the first to show that by 16 months, infants can retrieve mental representations of objects upon just hearing their labels.