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Can Pseudowords Become “Salty”? Evidence from Evaluative Conditioning

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Abstract

Evaluative conditioning (EC) refers to changes in the evaluation of neutral stimuli after repeated pairing with affective stimuli. We examined whether a non-evaluative attribute, saltiness, can be transferred from Japanese food words to Japanese pseudowords through EC. Eighty-six native Japanese speakers rated four pseudowords on saltiness, familiarity, valence, likability, and arousal before and after a learning phase in which each pseudoword was paired with either salty or non-salty food words. After learning, pseudowords paired with salty foods were rated as saltier than those paired with non-salty foods, whereas both conditions showed increases in familiarity, valence, likability, and arousal. Saltiness conditioning emerged only among participants who reported contingency awareness and showed better contingency memory, supporting propositional accounts of EC. These findings extend EC research to gustatory meaning and highlight the role of awareness in attribute learning.