

Verb Learning Meets Parsing

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The problem children face in learning the meanings of verbs is notoriously difficult. Verb-event pairings are not as transparent as noun-object pairings. One problem is focusing in on the particular parts of an event that are encoded in a verb. Some verbs encode the manner in which an action is done (waddle), some the path of motion (ascend), and others the instrument involved (hammer). My research asks what cues young children use to decide which of these aspects is relevant to a new verb's meaning. Specifically, we investigate children's use of both properties of the event and properties of the syntax in which they hear the verb to zero in on meaning.

Children aged 3 and 4 are taught made-up verbs (e.g. blicking) and are shown novel actions to go with them. The actions differ in what aspect is more visually salient; prior research has shown that children assume that a new verb encodes the most salient part of an event. The children in our study also hear the verb used in one of two syntactic contexts, each of which is compatible with a different verb meaning. We expect that children will use both salience and syntax to build up a representation of the verb. We use an eye-tracking paradigm to assess their understanding, which gives us a moment-by-moment picture of how they process sentences containing the new verb. This study is part of a relatively new but very promising move to using eye movements to study children's language comprehension.

Key terms: (first) language acquisition, sentence processing, eye-tracking