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"Mummy! Ball! Fish!": Why English-learning children produce nouns earlier than verbs

When English-learning children begin using words the majority of their early utterances (around 80%) are nouns. Compared to nouns, there is a paucity of verbs or non-verb relational words, such as “up” meaning “pick me up”. The primary explanations to account for these differences in use either argue in support of Gentner’s (1982) *cognitive account*, which claims that verbs entail more cognitive complexity than nouns, or they provide evidence challenging this account (Gopnik & Choi 1990, Tardiff 1996, Chenu and Jisa 2004).

In this paper I propose an additional explanation for children’s noun/verb asymmetry. Presenting a *multi-modal account* of word-learning based on children’s gesture and word combinations, I will show that children at the one-word stage use gestures to express verb-like elements and words to express noun-like elements. For example, a child might use a pointing gesture in the act of directing a caregiver’s attention to a shared object, much as the verb “look” does and a noun such as “fish” to identify the object of joint attention.

Data for this study is from an audio-visual corpus collected over a 16-month period in a daycare center. The study focuses on five children interacting with several different caregivers from ages 10-29 months. Data were transcribed and coded for lexical item functions (noun, verb etc.) and communicative gestures, which are gestures that are directed toward another individual. Gestures coded were: a) *point*: a movement of the index finger toward an object, accompanied by a simultaneous gaze; b) *gimme*: an extended open palm held out as if reaching for or receiving an object; c) *attend*: a hand holding out an object to be attended to or received by a recipient.

Results indicate that when children are beginning to combine early words with gestures caregivers treat children’s nouns as though they are indexing objects, while gestures, like verbs, are treated as though they are being used to elicit actions. By combining the two modalities, verb-like information about actions and relations can be expressed through gesture, while noun-like information about objects or people, can be expressed through a word. Looking across modalities provides an additional explanation for why young English-learning children produce nouns earlier and more frequently than verbs in their one-word communications. If children can produce only one word, and they can express verb-like information through a gesture, it is not surprising that their early words are likely to be nouns.

References

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