

Learning Nouns for Objects and Verbs for Actions:
The Roles of Social Interaction and Linguistic
Structure in Chinese Lexical Acquisition

XIAO, Wen

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Abstract

The present research examined Chinese toddlers' word learning, with a special focus on how they mapped novel words onto objects and actions in a single naming episode. Social interaction and linguistic cues were proposed to be effective in helping children successfully identify the referents of novel nouns and verbs. Using a preferential looking paradigm, 2- and 2.5-year-olds were tested on their acquisition and comprehension of novel words. In Study 1, the results suggested that the toddlers were learning novel labels as verbs with reference to what was new to the speaker, mapping the novel labels to actions that were introduced as a new element in the discourse context. The results of Studies 2 and 3, showed that grammatical auxiliaries and the basic subject-verb-object (SVO) word order in Cantonese and Mandarin were useful to the learners in their search for the right meaning of the novel label. Study 4 ascribed a more powerful role of linguistic cues in helping toddlers identify the action as the referent for the novel word, compared with social information. Taken together, these four studies illuminate the contributions of different kinds of information to toddlers' early representation of novel verbs and nouns. The difficulties in verb learning compared with noun learning were also discussed. The conclusion was drawn that 24-month-old toddlers were able to map novel verbs, and further, to extend them to scenes that differed from the ones they had seen during familiarization. Similar to noun acquisition, social understanding can also bias toddlers' interpretation of novel words as verbs. In addition, the syntactic rules in the native language play a relative more important role in verb learning.