

How infants map nonce phrases to scenes with objects and predicates.

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Abstract: When infants hear sentences containing unfamiliar words, are some language-world links (such as noun-object) more readily formed than others (verb-predicate)? What if the context renders verb-predicate and noun-object interpretations equally plausible? We examined 14-15-month-olds' capacity for linking semantic elements of scenes with simple bisyllabic nonce utterances. Each syllable either referred to the object, or the object's motion. Infants heard the syllables in either a VS- or SV-consistent order. Learning was tested using 2AFC language-guided looking. Infants learned the nouns and verbs equally well, showing no bias favoring nouns. In all conditions, infants learned the meaning of the utterance-final syllable, but not the initial one, suggesting that noun or verb biases played a smaller role than utterance position when noun- and verb-learning were equally supported by context.