

Preschoolers and Adults Interpret Proper Nouns as Labels for Particular Individuals

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In adult English, count nouns such as *dog* refer to a kind of object, whereas proper nouns such as *Max* refer to a particular individual. Studies of preschoolers' proper noun learning have been taken to show that children interpret proper nouns in an adult-like manner as referring to individuals (e.g. Katz, Baker & Macnamara, 1974). In these studies, the experimenter points to an object or drawing of an object and says something like *This is zavy*. After several repetitions of *zavy*, children are tested on their interpretation of the word by being asked if a particular object is *zavy* or by being asked to perform an action with *zavy*. If the object is clearly animate, children consistently indicate that they think the original referent of the word (and only the original referent of the word) is *zavy*. This performance is consistent with a proper noun interpretation of the word akin to *Max*, and hence researchers have concluded that children interpret a word introduced in this manner as a proper noun.

However, children's performance in such proper noun studies is also consistent with the possibility that children interpret the word as referring, not just to the original referent, but to a particular *kind of object*, namely objects which are importantly similar to the original referent.¹ Such an interpretation of *zavy* would be akin to *blonds*. On this possibility, children restrict their responses to the originally named object in these studies not because they think that the word applies to that object alone, but rather because there are simply no other members of the same kind as the original referent present in the stimulus array.

Liittschwager and Markman (1993) explicitly set out to test the possibility that preschool children interpret *zavy* in *This is zavy* as referring to a particular kind of object and provide suggestive evidence that children in fact interpret a word introduced as a proper noun as a label for a particular individual. We modified Liittschwager and Markman's procedure to correct some methodological problems and to explore this possibility further. We also included adult participants in addition to preschoolers to assess the generality of the conclusions drawn with children.

We taught sixteen 3-year-old children and eleven adults a new word (i.e. *This is zavy*) for an object with a salient property. We taught children and adults in the Animal condition the word in the presence of a toy animal, such as a bear wearing a colorful cape. We then removed the cape from the bear, brought out an identical bear (that is, a toy belonging to the same kind as the original toy) and put the

cape on the new bear. Participants were then asked, "Which one is *zavy*?" We taught children and adults in the Non-Animal condition the new word in the presence of a non-animal artifact with a salient property, such as a shoe with a colorful clip. We then removed the clip from the shoe, brought out an identical shoe and put the clip on the new shoe. Participants were then asked "Which one is *zavy*?". If children or adults interpret *zavy* as a proper noun, they should choose the original referent of the label. However, if they interpret *zavy* as referring to a kind of bear or shoe, they should choose indiscriminately between the two toys. A third possible interpretation of *zavy* is an interpretation akin to *pretty* or *caped/bowed* (i.e. *wearing-a-cape/wearing-a-bow*). On this interpretation, participants should choose the new object with the salient property.

Table 1: Children's and adults' percent selection of the original referent in the Animal and Non-Animal conditions.

Condition	Children	Adults
Animal	94	90
Non-Animal	38	33

Children and adults performed quite similarly, as shown in Table 1. Participants who were taught the new word in the presence of a toy animal chose the original referent on the vast majority of the trials when asked "Which one is *zavy*?". In contrast, participants who were taught the new word in the presence of a non-animal chose the original referent on about a third of the trials. This suggests that children, like adults, genuinely interpret a new word like *zavy* in *This is zavy* as a label for a particular individual if the referent of the word is an animal surrogate. However, children and adults do not make the same interpretation when the referent of the word is a non-animal artifact. Rather, they make an adjective or subtype interpretation in this case.

References

- Katz, N., Baker, E., & Macnamara, J. (1974). What's in a name? A study of how children learn common and proper names. *Child Development*, 45, 469-473.
- Liittschwager, J. C., & Markman, E. M. (1993). Young children's understanding of proper versus common nouns. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, LA.

¹ On this possibility, children use proper noun syntax, yet treat the word semantically as a count noun.