

The Impact of Short-Term Model Familiarity on Two-Year-Olds' Word Learning

Jina Ahn

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, United States

Erica Cartmill

Indiana University Bloomington, Bloomington, Indiana, United States

Catherine Sandhofer

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, United States

Abstract

Children's word learning occurs in rich social environments. Prior research suggests that young children prefer familiar social partners, facilitating imitation learning. However, the extent to which short-term familiarity influences word learning and generalization remains unclear. This study investigated whether two-year-old children learn and generalize novel object labels differently when taught by a familiar versus an unfamiliar experimenter. Familiarity was established through a brief play session before the word-learning task. Unexpectedly, the results revealed no differences in whether children learned the words from familiar and unfamiliar partners. In contrast, vocabulary size significantly predicted word generalization performance. These findings suggest that while social familiarity influences certain types of learning, word learning may depend more on cognitive and linguistic abilities than on familiarity with the speaker. This study contributes to our understanding of early word learning by highlighting the robustness of children's ability to learn and generalize language in diverse social contexts.