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Toddlers Acquire Verb Transitivity in Non-Social Overhearing Contexts

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How do children discover the meanings of words? We often describe this process as a social one, involving live interaction with an interlocutor and joint attention to the referent (e.g., Tomasello & Farrar, 1986; Roseberry et al., 2009; Krmar et al., 2007). But for verbs in particular, access to richly informative linguistic contexts can promote acquisition of a novel verb’s meaning even without visual access to its referent (e.g., Arunachalam & Waxman, 2010; Arunachalam et al., in press; Scott & Fisher, 2009; Yuan & Fisher, 2009). In these studies, toddlers were overhearers of a videotaped conversation between two adults who used the novel verb.

Here we ask whether toddlers can acquire verbs in even more socially impoverished contexts, in which syntactic information is available, but a conversational context is not. Toddlers are presented with:

- no discourse context
- no interlocutor (neither live nor videotaped)
- no visual referent for the novel verb
- no child-directed speech

## Participants & Design

Participants: 36 toddlers (25.0 to 29.9 months, mean age 27.1 months)
4 trials, each consisting of:
1) Syntactic Familiarization: novel verb presented in one of two contexts
   - Transitive, e.g., The boy is going to lorp the frog. Mommy lorp the frog. Mommy lorp the frog. Mommy lorp
   - Intransitive (conjoined-subject), e.g., The boy and the girl are going to lorp

The sentences stream ambiently from a speaker while the toddler watches an unrelated video (animated shapes move on the screen) or plays quietly with toys (e.g., Lany & Saffran, 2011).

2) Test: 2 simultaneous dynamic video scenes
   - a causative action: The boy lopers Ernie.
   - a synchronous action: The lion and the frog lorp.

At test, toddlers hear, e.g., “Where’s loring?” Eye gaze is recorded (Tobi T60XL).