

The acquisition of word meanings: interactions between parsing and learning

Having access to the syntactic structure of sentences can help children to discover the meaning of novel words (Gleitman, 1990). We exploited phrasal prosody to construct minimal pairs of sentences in French, to test how children's prosodic-syntactic processing skills impact their learning. A first study used sentences like '*Regarde la petite bamoule*', which can be produced either as [*Regarde la petite bamoule!*] - Look at the little bamoule!, where 'bamoule' is a noun, or as [*Regarde*], [*la petite*] [*bamoule!*] - Look, the little (one) is bamouling, where bamoule is a verb. 18-month-olds correctly parse such sentences and attribute a noun or verb meaning to the critical word depending on its position within the prosodic-syntactic structure. A second study relied on right-dislocated sentences containing a novel verb: [*il dase*] [*le bébé*]- 'he is dasing, the baby'(meaning 'the baby is dasing') which is minimally different from the transitive sentence [*il dase le bébé*] (he's dasing the baby). 28-month-olds interpret novel verbs presented in right-dislocated sentences as transitive, suggesting that they readily interpret each NP in the sentence as an argument of the verb, irrespective of phrasal prosody. Yet, when the syntactic context is enriched with simple intransitive sentences (in both conditions), children become able to correctly interpret right-dislocated sentences. Thus, being exposed to multiple syntactic frames for a single verb allowed children to recover from parsing biases. Taken together, our results show that children exploit the prosodic structure of an utterance to recover its syntactic structure and constrain their learning of novel words.

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