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Honors Psychology: Mind, Brain and Behavior

Harvard Class of 2016

*The Effect of Linguistic Structure on Children’s Interpretation of Verb Meaning*

**Writing Schedule**

**Jan 4** – Complete Experiment 1 write-up (methods, results, discussion)

**Jan 8** – Complete Experiment 2 write-up with skeleton data (methods, results)

**\*Jan 20** – Complete Abstract, Introduction and Discussion; First full draft of thesis

**Edits Log**

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| **Date** | **Section** | **Summary** |
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| **Jan 3** | Experiment 1 (all) | Updated edited version of Experiment 1; added results and discussion |
| **Jan 4** | Exp 1: discussion; Exp 2: methods | Updated discussion section; started draft Experiment 2 Methods |
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**Abstract**

**Introduction (will remove label eventually)**

**Experiment 1**

Short intro to experiment needed?

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were twenty 17- to 19-month-olds (range 17;00 to 19;00; 11 girls). An additional seven infants were tested but not included in the final analyses due to refusal to interact with the toy at test (*n* = 5) or experimenter error (*n* = 2). All children were recruited from a university database of interested families in the Cambridge area, and received a small toy and five dollars of travel compensation for participating.

**Materials**

The novel toy presented during the critical trail was a 12in x 4in x 10in box covered in green felt. On one side of the box surface was a large silver dome, which was meant to focus children’s imitation response to one local area, given their familiarity with acting upon buttons. A globe was situated a few inches away from the button on the box surface, and contained lights that would illuminate and spin upon activation (*figure X*). The globe’s handle was concealed within the box, and was wired to a button to facilitate hands-free operation of the spinning lights. A small camcorder was positioned facing directly perpendicular to the child to record their interaction with the toy.

**Procedure**

Families were greeted upon arrival to the lab, where the experimenter engaged the child in interactive free play in the lobby. Parents were also given instruction on how to neutrally respond to their children during the exploration period, where the participants were allowed to freely interact with the toy. To reduce any potential for biases, parents were asked to refrain from given explicit guidance on how to operate the toy, and told instead to give vague feedback such as, “hmm…I don’t know!” or “what do you think?” Parents were also informed that they should avoid specifically directing their child’s attention to the toy, as a lack of interest would be an equally meaningful measure of engagement.

Then, when the child appeared to be adequately comfortable socializing with the researcher, the family was escorted to a second room to begin the experiment. The testing room was a well-lit space that was empty except for two chairs, a table, and a curtain lining one of the sidewalls. The infant was placed in the parent’s lap and the pair sat directly across from the experimenter with the small table located in between them.

The study then began with a series of simple warm-up trials similar to the game Simon Says, in which a puppet, manipulated by the experimenter, would perform a simple action (e.g. clapping) and then encourage the child to imitate the action as well. This activity was geared toward preparing the infants to engage in imitative play. At the end of the warm-up trials, the puppet was put away and the novel toy was introduced.

In both the hands-exposed (*free*) and hands-occupied (*occupied*) conditions, the experimenter exclaimed that she was cold, and proceeded to wrap herself up in a blanket made of blue fleece. In the *occupied* condition, the experimenter used one hand to hold the blanket tightly around her shoulders, and the other to surreptitiously operate the toy out of view of the infant via the wired button. In the *free* condition, the experimenter loosely draped the blanket over her shoulders, and while doing so, covertly attached the button to a small piece of Velcro located on the underside of the table. The experimenter could then operate the toy by simply raising her knees to compress the button against the table. Once the button was secured, she placed her hands palms-down to either side of the toy, clearly visible to the child.

At this point, the critical sentence was introduced: either “Look! I’m going to *dax to* my toy!” in the *manner* condition or, “Look! I’m going to *dax* my toy!” in the *outcome* condition. This sentence was then followed by a demonstration the novel event, which consisted of the experimenter leaning forward to touch the silver button on top of the toy with her head while simultaneously activating the toy’s lights. This created the illusion that physical contact with the silver button caused the lights inside the globe to turn on and spin.

After performing the action, the experimenter repeated the critical sentence to describe the event that occurred (e.g. “Look! I *daxed(to)* my toy!). This procedure was then repeated a second time, such that by the end of the demonstration period, the child heard the critical sentence a total of four times. The sentence was introduced one final time when the toy was placed within the child’s reach, and the experimenter prompted the child to *dax(to)* the toy. When the child made first contact with the toy, the experimenter did not activate the globe as in the demonstration, but instead simply responded with the neutral, yet enthusiastic reply, “Okay! Now you can play.” This then initiated the exploration period.

During the exploration period, the experimenter told the children “they could play” or that “it was their turn” before walking off to another corner of the room and shuffling papers to look preoccupied. The main purpose of this portion of the study was to investigate children’s persistence when the toy failed to operate. After 60 seconds, or sooner if the child had begun to fuss, the experimenter returned to the table and encouraged the child to make one more attempt at contact with the toy, which was rewarded by activation of the lights and very enthusiastic praise. Children were allowed to play with the now-functioning toy for a little while longer before the session was ended, and the families were debriefed and thanked.

**Coding**

All sessions were videotaped in order to accurately assess each child’s first contact with the toy. Videos were viewed by the experimenter directly after the session, and coded as “hand touch,” “head touch,” “N/A” (for no response) or “fuss out,” when a child was unable to complete the trials. Any contact made exclusively by a hand (i.e. pressing with palm) or finger (i.e. poking) was coded as a hand-touch. For the purposes of this particular paradigm, a head touch was inclusive of lips, cheeks, chins, and the like, in addition to the more straightforward forehead contact. Given 17- to 19-month-olds’ limited motor coordination, head touches preceded by the use of the hands as a helping agent (e.g. lifting the toy to their head) were considered valid head touches. Anecdotal evidence suggested that manifestation of children’s imitation attempts at this age are extremely varied, thus the more inclusive criteria for a head touch was designed to capture whether the children recognized the use of a novel body part, and sought to imitate that novelty, as well.

**Results**

To facilitate a more robust analysis of the data, a 2 x 2 (hands x language) between-subjects design was used. Running all four possible conditions simultaneously allowed for various patterns in the data to be interpreted more holistically. For example, if participants in the hands exposed conditions performed more head touches than those in the hands occupied conditions, regardless of language condition, this would support a successful replication of Gergley et al.’s (2002) finding that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Further, if participants in the manner conditions performed more head touches than those in the outcome conditions, regardless of hand condition, this would support two conclusions: first, that the semantic difference between manner versus outcome is reflected syntactically, and is salient to infants in our target age range; and second, that this difference is a cue that maps to the interpretation of events as they occur in the world (and as they are perceived by the child).

Taken together, these predictions give rise to a sort of cue gradient, in which infants in the exposed/manner condition are given the most head-touch eliciting cues, and are thus pulled farthest from the hand-touch baseline response. Infants in the occupied/outcome condition would then be situated on the opposite end of the spectrum, receiving the fewest head-touch eliciting cues, and consequently performing more hand-touches. Examining the pattern of results for infants in the two intermediary conditions, who received both head- and hand-touch eliciting cues, presents the opportunity to measure cue “strength” or “dominance” when conflicting cues are conveyed simultaneously.

The frequency of each first response type, either head touch or hand touch, is presented in Table X. Not only does this pattern of results markedly diverge from the proportional differences we would expect to see if our hypothesis were true, it clearly shows a failure of all but two participants to perform a head touch at all during the trials. Contrary to our predictions, nearly 90% of infants performed the head-touch baseline response, regardless of condition.

Should I go on (& mention gender/mcdi differences per trial & log regression), or futile at this point…?

This null result is further proven through logistic regression, which shows no significant relationship between condition and predicted first response, STATS.

While each trial included an exploration period in which infants were allowed to freely engage with the novel toy, their behaviors were not coded as a part of this analysis. Any patterns therein would not be interpretable within the scope of this particular paradigm because of its failure to replicate Gergley et al.’s (2002) results. Without producing the expected differences between the hands conditions, where those who saw hands exposed performed more head touches, we cannot reasonably draw conclusions regarding the effects of language, our true variable of interest.

**Discussion**

Experiment 1 was designed to test the relationship between the structure in which a novel verb is presented, and the interpreted meaning of that verb. If it were the case that children used the semantic cues, conveyed through syntax, to guide their interpretation of a novel event, then we would have expected to see a cue gradient between the conditions. Participants who heard and saw cues that suggested the manner to be the essential feature of the novel event should consequently seek to more closely imitate this feature, and thus perform the most head touches. Participants in the outcome-focused condition should conversely prefer to take the simplest means to achieve the outcome: the more efficient hand touch.

However, we instead found that nearly all participants in Experiment 1 performed the baseline response of a hand touch, regardless of condition. Given our inability to replicate Gergley et al.’s (2002) paradigm, valid conclusions cannot be drawn regarding infants’ ability to perceive the manner versus outcome distinction, or to use this distinction to guide their verb learning. Thus, the question of the effect of linguistic structure on children’s interpretation of verb meaning remains unresolved. If we wish to more thoroughly explore the relationship between the manner versus outcome distinction, and how infants use such cues to guide their verb learning, modifications to our paradigm must be made.

The first consideration made was in regards to potential physical constraints within the paradigm. Perhaps it is the case that infants in this age range are physically unable to perform the motor functions necessary to complete a head touch. This action requires core strength, upper body strength, and the skilled coordination of the two. However, previous research, including Gergley et al.’s (2002) study featured infants two to four months younger than our age range successfully completing head touches (*for reference, see* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_).

Our focus then shifted to the toy, itself. After thorough review of the previous studies that used any remotely similar type of light box stimulus within the context of a rational actor imitation paradigm, two alterations became evidently necessary. First, were the actual dimensions of the toy. Most toys used in the other studies ranged in height from X to Yin, markedly shorter than our 10in tall toy. Lowering the toy not only puts it within a physical range that is more comfortable for the infants, but also makes the novel head touch action far more salient, by requiring a full bend at the waist by the experimenter, rather than the simple head tilt required to reach the taller toy.

The second change to the toy streamlined the perceived relationship between the novel head touch and the activation of the toy. To accurately recognize the novel event using the original stimulus, the infant must necessarily understand a relatively complex causal model. They must interpret that the experimenter’s acting on one side of the toy (the button) causes an effect in a visually distinct entity located on the opposite side (the globe). Thus, in Experiment 2, the button was removed, and the experimenter instead acted directly upon the globe, which was centered in the toy. This modification reduces the complexity of the action, while still providing a focused location toward which infants may direct their imitation response.

Using the original 2 x 2 design, in conjunction with the updated toy, Experiment 2 was an attempt to replicate Gergley et al.’s (2002) original head touch patterns. If successful, we would then be situated to explore the added effects, if any, of syntax on infants’ interpretation of the meaning of a novel verb.

**Experiment 2**

**Method**

**Participants**

**Materials**

**Procedure**

**Coding**

**Results**

**Discussion**

**General Discussion**

**Conclusion**