

Nouns before verbs? New research agenda could help shed light on early language, cognitive development

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Researchers are digging deeper into whether infants' ability to learn new words is shaped by the particular language being acquired.

A new Northwestern University study cites a promising new research agenda aimed at bringing researchers closer to discovering the impact of different languages on early language and cognitive development.

For decades, researchers have asked why [infants](#) learn new nouns more rapidly and more easily than new verbs. Many researchers have asserted that the early advantage for learning nouns over verbs is a universal feature of human language.

In contrast, other researchers have argued that early noun-advantage is not a universal feature of [human language](#) but rather a consequence of the particular language being acquired.

Sandra Waxman, lead author of the study and Louis W. Menk Professor of Psychology at Northwestern, shows in her research that even before infants begin to produce many verbs in earnest, infants acquiring either noun-friendly or verb-friendly languages already appreciate the concepts underlying both noun and verb meaning.

In all languages examined to date, researchers see a robust ability to map nouns to objects, Waxman said, but when it comes to mapping verbs to events, infants' performance is less robust and more variable. Their ability to learn new verbs varied not only as a function of the [native language](#) being acquired, but also with the particular linguistic context in which the verb was presented.

Based on new evidence, a shift in the research agenda is necessary, according to Waxman and her colleagues.

"We now know that by 24 months infants acquiring distinctly [different languages](#) can successfully map novel [nouns](#) to objects and novel [verbs](#) to event categories," Waxman said. "It is essential that we shift the research focus to include infants at 24 months and younger, infants who are engaged in the very process of acquiring distinctly different native languages."

Waxman said the implications are clear. "Rather than characterizing languages as either 'noun friendly' or 'verb friendly,' it would be advantageous to adopt a more nuanced treatment of the syntactic, semantic, morphologic and pragmatic properties of each [language](#) and the consequences of these properties on infants' acquisition of linguistic structure and meaning."

Provided by Northwestern University

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