

Study finds toddlers can learn verbs even in non-social contexts

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(Medical Xpress)—Language acquisition has traditionally been considered a social, interactive process, however new research from Boston University College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences: Sargent College reveals that toddlers are able to acquire the meanings of words even in "socially impoverished contexts" where social or visual information is absent.

Sudha Arunachalam, Ph.D., director of the BU Child Language Lab and assistant professor in the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences at Sargent College authored the study which provides new evidence that just overhearing words may be enough for children to learn them.

This study builds upon previous research from Arunachalam demonstrating that by age two, [toddlers](#) can extract information about a new verb from its syntactic context, even before viewing a relevant event. These new findings show that children can do so even in an impoverished social context, without discourse context or visual access to the speakers.

"The only information provided was linguistic," said Arunachalam. "Our goal was to determine whether 2-year-olds, on hearing new verbs in informative sentences, could use their syntactic content alone to map the novel verbs to meaning, even though no social or visual information was available."

Arunachalam and her team presented sentences as ambient noise – meaning toddlers did not have to directly attend to anyone. Researchers then tested whether the toddlers had learned the word meanings by tracking the children's eye gaze as they looked at potential referents for the verbs.

Findings indicate that toddlers can learn at least some aspects of word meaning from contexts in which they are not directly attending to the conversation around them, without observational or social information for cues.

"What this new research tells us is that toddlers have strong abilities to extract meanings, and not just word forms, from the ambient speech stream." Arunachalam said.

Arunachalam explains that she and other researchers have begun to address the question "Can toddlers can benefit from socially impoverished learning situations?" by closing in on the kinds of information, at a minimum, that toddlers require to establish a new word's meaning.

These results shed light on the way toddlers may acquire aspects of verb meaning by overhearing conversations in which they may not be directly involved, and in which no visual referent, discourse context, or child-directed conversation is available.

"Of course we do not claim that toddlers don't use observational and social information to acquire the meanings of words when they are available," said Arunachalam. "Rather, we argue that when these sources of [information](#) are absent, toddlers nevertheless posit rudimentary word meanings that can be built upon in future encounters."

More information: Sudha Arunachalam, "Two-year-olds can begin to acquire verb meanings in socially impoverished contexts," *Cognition*, Volume 129, Issue 3, December 2013, Pages 569-573, ISSN 0010-0277, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.08.021

Provided by Boston University

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