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Why do toddlers learn words for objects before words for actions?

A huge proportion of children's early vocabularies consists of nouns. Researchers call this the "noun bias" but they do not agree on why children learn a preponderance of nouns early in development. Children may be conceptually predisposed to learn nouns, because nouns denote objects that are easily perceived. For example, the word block refers to an object with clear boundaries, while the word get refers to an action without a clear beginning or end whose form varies depending on what one is getting. Alternatively, the frequency of presentation may lead children to learn more nouns: Children may hear more nouns than other parts of speech. The present study assesses whether a conceptual predisposition or frequency is responsible by controlling the frequency with which children hear novel words that refer to objects or actions. Twenty-six children participated in a word learning task bimonthly from 12 – 30 months of age. The experimenter presented each child with six novel objects and labeled them with novel names. For each object, she performed a novel action and labeled the action with a novel name. Each object and action name was presented five times. Word comprehension and production were tested to assess children's knowledge of the words. Children's imitations, spontaneous productions, and elicited productions of the words and actions were coded from videotapes of the sessions and their comprehension was scored. We are currently analyzing the age at which children demonstrate knowledge of the nouns and the verbs and will present our preliminary findings. If children learn nouns prior to verbs even when frequency of presentation is controlled, the view that the noun bias depends on a conceptual predisposition is supported. If, however, children learn verbs as quickly as nouns, it suggests that frequency of presentation is responsible for biases in children's early lexicons.