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### **The salience of novel words in speech directed to young children**

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When children begin to learn vocabulary, they tend to learn more nouns than verbs (Goldfield, 1982; Nelson, 1973). Several explanations for this noun bias have been offered. One possibility is that the way nouns are used in sentences makes it easier for children to segment them from the stream of fluent speech. Fernald & Mazzie (1991) found that mothers highlight nouns in speech directed to children by placing them in sentence-final position. We examined the use of novel nouns and novel verbs in speech directed to children to determine whether verbs might be used in salient positions as well. Using data from a previous word-learning study run in our lab with 12- to 30-month-old children, we examined the sentence position of 7,742 novel nouns and verbs. The novel nouns overwhelmingly occurred in sentence-final position, but novel verbs also were used in ways that may make them easier for young children to learn. Novel verbs were most frequently presented in isolation (55%), while nouns almost never were (1%). In addition, verbs frequently occurred in final position or followed only by an unstressed pronoun (26%). In this word learning task, children produced the novel verbs more frequently than the novel nouns. We hypothesize that the high proportion of verbs in isolation played a critical role in this finding, and that more generally, salience of words in utterances affects how easily children can match segment new words from fluent speech. Directions for future studies to evaluate this hypothesis will be discussed.