Grasping the World Through Words: From Action to Linguistic Production of Verbs in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT:
We investigated whether the bodily-mediated production of verbs emerges earlier than verb recognition and oral production during early language acquisition. Children (aged 18–22, 23–27, 28–32, and 33–37 months) viewed animated pictures representing actions related to transitive and intransitive verbs and were asked to (i) orally indicate the verb presented, (ii) recognize the target verb among other verbs, and (iii) perform the actions corresponding to the target verb enunciated by the experimenter. Children 18–22 months showed a capacity to enact the verbs, while their recognition and oral production abilities were not comparably developed. Until 27 months of age, children produced more transitive than intransitive verbs across tasks. The gap between verb recognition and verb oral production was found in all ages tested. This is the first study to directly demonstrate that the ability to produce verbs, especially transitive verbs, via overt body actions emerges ontogenetically earlier than recognition and oral production.


Keywords: language; development; self; cognition; action