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The origins of words: conceptual knowledge and action interpretation guide infant word learning

Word learning begins in the first months of life. By their first birthday and well before they are able to speak, infants come to possess a sizeable receptive lexicon. How do they acquire it? It has been suggested that early word learning is only possible thanks to low-level associative mechanisms that match co-occurring word forms and objects. I will present a series of eye-tracking and neuroimaging experiments challenging this claim and argue that infants appreciate the referential nature of language. I will provide evidence that 12-month-olds use their preverbal conceptual and category knowledge as a source of word meanings. I will also show that they can distinguish communicative actions (e.g., pointing to a cup) from instrumental actions (e.g., grasping a cup to have a sip of water) and selectively expect the former to indicate referents of new labels.