

Learning in an interest-driven context: the effect of young children's selective interests across language development

Rajalakshmi Madhavan & Nivedita Mani

Psychology of Language Group, University of Göttingen; 2 Leibniz ScienceCampus Primate Cognition, Göttingen

Parents often report their children being intensely interested in certain objects from their environment. As primary caregivers, they play a vital role in nurturing these interests; due to which children are also shown to learn better. While such interests develop young as 18 months, it is unknown how these interests are sustained across early childhood, and how they influence language development and daily interactions. Against this background, we present two studies that (a) takes a longitudinal look at the development of children's interests in particular object categories, and subsequent effect on their vocabulary, and (b) examines whether children's interests modulate quality of parent-child interactions and subsequent novel word retention. (a) The first study measured fifty-six parent reports of children's category-specific vocabulary knowledge and interests at two timepoints in development – 18 and 24 months. We found that parents report that children's category-specific interests are sustained over a 6-month period, and that these interests at 18 months predict the size of the category-specific vocabulary at 24 months. (b) In the second study, seventy-nine parent-child dyads (children 24-30-months-old) participated in a shared book-reading task, where the dyads read two books; one of high and one low interest to the child, with one novel word-object mapping in each book. We also examined children's later recognition of newly-introduced word-object mappings. Our results show that quality of interaction varied as a function of children's interest in the books; however, we found no effect of interest or interaction quality on novel word learning, though children successfully learnt the novel word. Taken together, we show that children's sustained individual interests during their formative years influence the trajectory of their category-specific vocabulary size, and later, their selective interests also influence the quality of interaction during shared book-reading, although its direct influence on word learning is no longer apparent.