Chapter 85
Learning Words from Experience: An Integrated Framework

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ABSTRACT

How does experience influence children’s acquisition of word meanings? In this chapter, the authors discuss the evidence from two bodies of literature that take different perspectives to answer this question. First, they review evidence from the “experience” literature, which has demonstrated that different experiential factors (e.g., differences in the quantity and quality of maternal speech) are related to individual differences in children’s early vocabularies. Although the results of the studies within this literature are interesting, the authors argue that they do not clarify how experience influences children’s vocabulary development. They posit that this question can best be answered by marrying the “experience” literature and the “cognitive” literature, which has identified the skills and knowledge that children possess that help them determine the meanings of words. The authors demonstrate how integrating both literatures will provide a valuable framework from which research can be designed and hypotheses tested. In doing so, their framework will provide a comprehensive understanding of how experience influences children’s lexical development.

INTRODUCTION

To learn a new word, a child must parse the word from the ongoing speech stream, identify the intended referent of the word (e.g., object, person, or place), and then make an inference about the meaning of the word (e.g., the object’s name, function, colour, etc.). Despite the apparent difficulty of the word-learning task, children’s vocabulary development proceeds at an impressive pace (Anglin, 1993; Carey, 1978). Children show signs of understanding words at approximately 8 months of age. By 11 months, children understand approximately 50 words and have produced their first intelligible word. At 14 months, children understand over 150 words and produce approxi-
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Among same-aged children, there are substantial individual differences in both quantitative and qualitative aspects of lexical development. Before we describe this variability, it is worth acknowledging various theoretical debates concerning the classes of mechanisms that are important for cognitive development, and their detailed characterizations.

We begin by describing three individual differences in children’s vocabulary development that have received particular attention within the experience perspective. We then highlight the key experiential factors that this perspective has identified as contributing to the observed individual differences. The findings within this literature clearly demonstrate that children whose input contains more words and/or different types of words, are more likely to learn more words and/or different types of words (e.g., Goldfield, 1993; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, & Hedges, 2010). However, the findings do not demonstrate how experience influences the variability in children’s lexical development. We posit that the input that children hear during conversations with their caregivers functions to shape the strategies children use to learn new words. In turn it is the presence, or absence, of a particular strategy influences a child’s vocabulary growth and composition. We present some recent findings within the cognitive perspective, which we believe provide valuable insight into the question of how experience shapes children’s vocabulary development. Lastly, we argue that integrating the experience and cognitive literatures will provide a valuable framework from which research questions can be designed and hypotheses tested to gain a comprehensive understanding of how experience influences children’s lexical development.

WHAT VARIES IN CHILDREN’S LEXICAL DEVELOPMENT?

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