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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 47(0)

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Publication Date

2025

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Beyond Word Meaning Mappings: The Role of Low-Informative Events in Conceptual Alignment

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Abstract

Word meanings are rarely transparent from their extralinguistic contexts. How children learn words from an input with "low-informative" (LI) events is of interest because even adults struggle to learn from LI events (Gleitman & Trueswell, 2020; Medina et al., 2011). This study revisited LI events' contribution to learning by probing what can be gleaned from LI events even if they don't yield exact meanings. Adults (N = 120) learned words (e.g., "modi") that had English meanings (e.g., "apple") from LI events. Participants then both guessed the word's exact meaning and rated several candidate meanings. Although LI events failed to yield accurate mappings of meanings, they led to representations (derived via the ratings) that were semantically aligned with those of the true meanings. These results highlight the potential for LI events to get learning off the ground and the implications of viewing word learning as more than a mapping problem.

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