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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 44(44)

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Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed

The role of vocabulary and executive functions in the comparison process for novel word generalization

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Abstract

Comparing several examples of a target category leads to better generalization than single presentations. It has been argued that the more children know about the world the more likely they will discover new conceptually relevant dimensions (Gentner & Hoyos, 2017). From another point of view, the comparison process is underpinned by control processes such as executive functions (Augier & Thibaut, 2013). This study contributes to this debate with a correlational approach in which we assessed, word generalization in a comparison design, inhibition, cognitive flexibility, working memory, and vocabulary. 120 five-years-old children performed the generalization task with unfamiliar objects and 120 other five-years-old children performed the generalization task with familiar objects. Whatever the familiarity of the objects in the generalization task, we found positive and significant correlations between categorization and flexibility but not with vocabulary. It suggests that executive functions are more at play in the comparison process than word knowledge.