

Representation and acquisition of symmetrical verbs

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Abstract: Languages use two distinct classes of verbs to encode the following distinct event types. Mutual events, in which participants share equal, reciprocal roles, are encoded by symmetrical verbs (e.g. meet). Non-mutual events, in which participants have distinct and non-reciprocal roles, are encoded by asymmetrical verbs (e.g. kick) (Gleitman, Gleitman, Miller, Ostrin, 1996; Dimitriadis, 2008). These two classes of verbs participate in distinct syntactic structures, which differentiate between them. For example, sentences "Sam met Jane" and "Sam kicked Jane" entail mutual vs. non-mutual participation but a singular event, while sentences "Sam and Jane met" and "Sam and Jane kicked" differ in both the type of participation and the number of sub-events (1 for meet, 2 for kick). Do children have knowledge of this complex interaction between semantics and syntax? In an act-out study, we find that children as young as five have similar competence to adults