

On learning linguistic categories

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Many bilinguals will be sympathetic to the view that the language you speak affects the way you think. If this view is correct, then one might expect linguistic input to have a dramatic impact upon conceptual development in infancy. I will describe a series of experiments that provides support for the view that labels impact the process of categorization in young infants even before they begin to produce their first words, to the extent that labels can override the perceptual dissimilarities between objects and lead infants to treat them as more similar to each other. The experiments also demonstrate that young infants can simultaneously compute the correlational structure of object features in the visual domain *at the same time* as they compute the relationship of that correlational structure to novel features (words) in the auditory domain. This cross-modal, computational capacity is a powerful tool for the young infant to exploit in deriving the meaning of words.

A second series of studies investigates the development of the semantic system during the second year of life. Hitherto, investigations of word meaning in early lexical development have been restricted to explorations of the associative/reference relations between labels and events. Research has neglected the infant's representation of the semantic or associative relationships between the words themselves which lies at the heart of adult semantic networks. I will present a new technique for measuring linguistic priming effects in infants and show how we can begin to trace the emergence of semantic networks even during the earliest stages of lexical development.