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‘Where does a wug go?’
How pre-schoolers use sentence context to infer the taxonomic categories of novel nouns

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USING VERB SELECTIONAL RESTRICTIONS TO INFERENCE NOVEL NOUN MEANINGS

Prior studies:

- Only examined inferred semantic categories at very broad level.
  - e.g. animate vs. inanimate.
- Only required identification of object appearance.
- Novel object appearance logically connected to verb selectional restrictions.
  - ‘the veps is crying’ → only 1 obj has eyes.
- In many studies, learning could have occurred in test phase itself.

METHOD

TRAINING:
- 36 4-yr-olds, all exposed to 1 novel food AND 1 novel clothing
- Objects shapes did not indicate category
- Story-book context
- Each frame had a target AND a foil.

DESIGN: (between-subjects)
1. Verb selectional restrictions
   a) Food: cook X; eat X; spill X; feed baby X
   b) Clothes: iron Y; wear Y; put on Y; take off Y
2. Label-only: ‘is with X’, ‘X is there’, ‘there is the X’

TEST:
1. Taxonomic categorisation
   ‘Where does a wug go?’
2. Object-label mapping
   ‘Show me the wug!’

Preschoolers can infer object function from sentential context alone

‘Where does a wug go?’

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