

Participants heard test sentences for each context (ExT or GenT) in a block as indicated in the table below, counterbalanced for order. Half the participants were in Condition A, the other half in Condition B. Results below are on first-block data unless otherwise noted.

Condition A = Block A then Block B

Condition B = Block B then Block A

Block ExT	Block GenT
Filler	Filler
ExT	GenT
Filler	GenT
ExT	Filler
ExT	GenT

Adults were predicted to accept test sentences in both contexts because (3) is true at test and (4) is generally true. If children were sensitive to the statistical distributions in their input found by Sneed (2005), they should interpret sentences with BP subjects generically, rejecting sentences like (3). In fact, though, for adults the existential reading (3) is significantly more accessible than the generic (4) (64% acceptance rate for the existential compared to 24% for the generic ($t = +3.11$, $p = 0.004$)) whereas for children, *both* readings are equally accessible (74% for existential compared to 81% for generic ($t = -.77$, $p = 0.45$)). Children did not differ from adults in their acceptance of existential sentences ($t = +0.78$, $p = 0.44$); they differed significantly from adults for generic sentences ($t = 5.76$, $p < 0.001$). Children's correct responses on filler items and justifications on test items indicate that their acceptance of test sentences in the GenT context is not due to a response bias. Children in both ordering conditions accepted the interpretation they heard in block 1 at higher rates than the interpretation they heard in block 2 ($F = 6.16$, $p < 0.02$).

These findings suggest that children possess a system of grammatical representations that is richer than could be derived from the input alone. They can use the input to test hypotheses provided by their grammars, but are not limited to what they hear. The observed ordering effects seem to indicate that the interpretation children hear first remains activated throughout the experimental task and influences their judgments of the alternate interpretation, suggesting that priming is operative at the syntax-semantics interface. The differences between adult and child populations suggest that there may be pragmatic constraints that children are not sensitive to restricting the contexts in which generic expression is felicitous.

References

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