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Institution conferring degree: Virginia Tech
College, School, or Division: College of Science
Department or Program: Psychology
Advisor/Committee Chair: Robin Panneton
Committee Member: Anthony Cate
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The Role of Contingency and Ostensive Cues on Infants’ Cognitively Demanding Word-Object Learning

Laura Mills-Smith

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

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April 27, 2016
Blacksburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

Older infants are good referential learners. That is, at around 14-months of age, they begin to learn the verbal labels of objects and events around them. However, referential learning can be made more challenging by increasing the lexical similarity between labels. The primary goal of this study was to examine whether an adult speaker’s ostensive cues and eye gaze-object contingency could augment referential learning in 14-month-old infants under difficult conditions (i.e., minimal pair labels). In Experiment 1, infants were familiarized and tested on two word-object associations with minimal pairs (e.g., “bin” and “din”), presented on an eye-tracker. Importantly, each session began when infants made eye contact with a female speaker on the screen, and she continually looked at and verbally referenced each object in an infant-directed style. On test trials when the familiar object+label was switched, infants significantly increased their visual scanning of the speaker’s mouth compared to control trials. In Experiment 2, the same procedure was followed with a new group of 14-month-olds, except that the speaker now looked in the opposite direction from the objects on the screen, but continued to label them with minimal pairs in an infant-directed style. In contrast to the results of Experiment 1, infants in this latter experiment did not differentially attend to any area of her face during the switch trials. This pattern of results shows that the ostensive nature of a social partner augments infants’ referential learning under cognitive challenge, but it is the contingent nature of the speaker’s regard to what is being labeled that is a necessary factor in promoting learning.