The Effect of Semantic Characteristics on Word Learning by Preschool Children
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**Purpose:** Word learning occurs when a child stores in memory, the word’s lexical (i.e., form characteristics) and semantic (i.e., meaning) information. Prior research suggests that the number of semantic neighbors influences word learning. This means that children learn new words that are semantically similar to few words better than new words that are semantically similar to many words. Another semantic characteristic of interest is the relationship between a new word and its strongest real word neighbor. For example, some new words will be highly related to the strongest whereas others are weakly related to the strongest neighbor. The purpose of this study is to determine how high versus low semantic neighbor strength influences a child’s ability to learn new words.

**Methods:** Data were collected from 20 preschool aged children who were exposed to 12 novel objects, with high vs. low semantic strength, coupled with non-words. Children were exposed to these stimuli via computer games over 5 sessions. Learning was assessed through a picture-naming task before and after each exposure.

**Results:** The preliminary results showed that the effect of neighbor strength was inconsistent during early training. Later in training, children learned and named new words with low neighbor strength better than those with high neighbor strength.

**Conclusions:** Our preliminary findings suggest that high strength neighbors may interfere with word learning later in training by creating competition between the known word and the new word.