

Abstract

When children hear unexpected labels applied to objects, they can use those labels (rather than appearance) to guide their inferences about the objects' nonobvious properties. Does this signal children's willingness to believe that objects may be more than they appear, or does it merely reflect children's sensitivity to social demands? In previous studies, children persisted in using the unexpected labels to describe objects to another, ostensibly naïve person, suggesting they had believed those labels. In the current study, children also made further inferences about objects based on their labels, again even when the experimenter who had provided those labels was no longer present.

Background

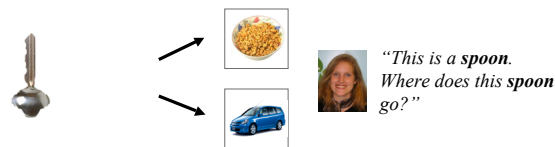
- The label applied to an object can lead even very young children to make an inference about that object different from the one they would otherwise have made (Gelman & Markman, 1986).
- But perhaps children respond in this way simply to please the experimenter. Indeed, they often endorse this response when asked to explain another individual's errors on a conservation of number task (Siegal, Waters & Dinwiddy, 1988).
- Children who use unexpected labels for inference often later use those labels in naming the objects for a different person (Jaswal, Lima, & Small, in preparation).

Research Question

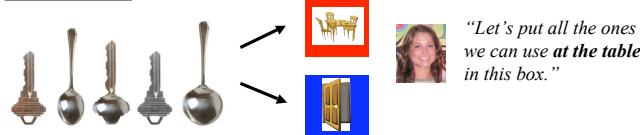
When 3-yr-olds use unexpected labels to make an inference about objects' non-obvious properties, will they continue to appeal to the labels for additional inferences, even with a different interlocutor?

Methods

1st Inference

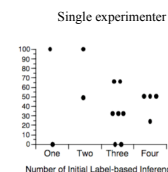


2nd Inference



Results

Percent 2nd inferences by label (split by 1st inference)



1. Children who heard objects labeled made inferences consistent with the label on 70% of trials.
2. Once children made the initial inference by label, they made a second label-based inference with a different experimenter on 35% of trials.
3. Children were no more likely to make a second label-based inference with the same experimenter (44%) than with a different one, suggesting memory, not social constraints on the task.

Conclusions

- Children who used unexpected labels to make inferences about objects sometimes continued to rely on those labels later to make new inferences.
- Although children did not always use labels consistently, there are likely memory constraints. Children were no more likely to persist with labels when questioned twice by the same experimenter, than when experimenters changed places.



References

- Gelman, S.A. & Markman, E.M. (1986). Categories and induction in young children. *Cognition*, 23, 183-209.
- Jaswal, V. K., Lima, O. K., & Small, J. (in preparation). Compliance, conversion, and category induction.
- Siegal, M., Waters, L. J., & Dinwiddy, L. S. (1988). Misleading children: Causal attributions for inconsistency under repeated questioning. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 45(3), 438-456.

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