A Partial Solution to the Homonym Problem: Parents’ Linguistic Input to Young Children

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During early word learning, children may assume a unique form-meaning relationship: that a unique form corresponds to each meaning (Clark, 1987) and vice versa (Slobin, 1985). Homonyms appear to violate this one-to-one mapping, and therefore might prove problematic; for example, all things labeled bat might be put into the odd category ‘things that fly and are used to play ball.’ We asked whether parents’ descriptions of homonyms to their young children provide linguistic information that could help children to differentiate conceptually and linguistically these cases. Fifteen parents described pictured sets of concrete object homonyms and categorically related objects to their young children. Parents described homonyms by using explicit statements of category inclusion, subordinate forms (compounds, e.g., kiwi-bird), and specific forms that flagged the unusual homonym relationship. Parents especially provided distinctive alternating forms for homonym pairs (e.g., iceskate vs. skate-fish) suggesting that they were attempting to preserve the unique form-meaning relationship violated by homonyms. We discuss how such linguistic information might be used by children to differentiate homonyms.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we ask what kinds of syntactic and morphological information are available in parents’ speech to guide children’s inferences about word-meaning relationships. We focus on homonyms, which are cases where the usual one-to-one relationship between words and categories appears to break down: the same monomorphemic word applies to objects in unrelated categories, violating the “category-crossing constraint” (Bever & Rosenbaum, 1970; Keil, 1979). Our question is whether the range and type of forms present in parents’ descrip-
tions of homonyms might help children linguistically differentiate between the two entries when such violations occur.

Homonyms might present two problems for children. First, children might have difficulties establishing separate conceptual entries: in principle, they could map the single form bat onto the rather strange category 'things that fly and are used to play ball.' This seems somewhat unlikely, as young children do not even recognize that the two kinds of bat share the same name (Peters & Zaidel, 1980). But in turn, this fact raises the question of how children learn that Pekinese and Doberman Pinschers, both called dog, are members of a single category, but wooden sticks and winged beasts, both called bat are not.

Second, even if children initially establish separate entries on the basis of the objects' ontological categories, they still must discover ways to differentiate linguistically the two words. For example, adults appear to reinstate unique mappings between forms and meanings for homonyms (Orr, 1962), and this suggests that there may be a general pressure for language users to recruit separate forms for separate meanings. We are interested in the possibility that linguistic information present in the description of homonyms might be important in helping children both to conceptually and linguistically differentiate the two entries.

Information about such descriptions would be relevant to current questions about form-meaning relationships. One hypothesis (Clark, 1983, 1987) is that children expect every two forms to contrast in meaning, obeying the Principle of Contrast—that languages do not have synonyms. For example, children seem to expect that new words will correspond to new meanings (Clark, 1987; Markman & Wachtel, 1988); although according to Clark, not the reverse. The Principle of Contrast would suggest that if parents provide different forms for homonyms, children will be prepared to establish separate entries, on the basis of linguistic as well as conceptual principles.

A second hypothesis (Slobin, 1973, 1985) is that children also expect every two meanings to contrast in form—that is, that languages do not have homonyms. Of course, homonyms do exist, and the question then arises how children might deal with them. According to Slobin, children insist on creating formal distinctions where none exists in the language. For example, French children resist use of the same phonological form une to express both the indefinite article and the number one; instead, they use une for the former, but insert de for the latter ("Une de voiture" to say "one car"; Karmiloff-Smith, 1979). This view would suggest that children will actively search for distinct forms in their parents' speech.

One possibility suggested by both these views is that children are tolerant of homonyms because these words are often differentiated by syntactic and morphological context—that is, by differences in form. For example, the words