

Bigger Versus Smaller: Children's Understanding of Size Comparison Words Becomes More Precise With Age

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Abstract

The ability to compare things and to talk about those comparisons plays a key role in how humans learn, with associations with later educational outcomes. However, words that describe relations between objects, like comparisons, are difficult to learn, and current evidence about their acquisition is mixed. We examined how children learn size comparison words, and how their interpretations of these changes across development, in the first study to apply word-level analyses that allowed us to examine individual developmental trajectories of comparative word acquisition. One-hundred-and-forty British children (36–107 months; 68 girls; majority White) were asked to build block structures that were *bigger*, *longer*, *smaller*, *shorter*, or *taller* than an experimenter's. Children were most successful with words that refer to size increases. Younger children were less accurate with *smaller* and *shorter*, often building bigger structures. The dimensional aspect of *taller* emerged gradually. These findings suggest that children's interpretation of the meaning of size comparison words changes and becomes more precise across development, and provides new evidence that the rate of acquisition of these labels differs across the concepts they refer to. Critically, these developmental trajectories are not easily explained by input frequency or a bias to build taller structures, suggesting a nuanced interplay between conceptual and lexical development in this domain of language acquisition.