Joint Engagement and Vocabulary Development: Re-defining data collection, categorization and analysis

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This paper analyses the frequency distribution of engagement levels, joint attention activities, and their correlations to vocabulary development in different cultures. Information was collected observationally from 18 subjects in rural and urban Mozambican communities, averaging 13-months at commencement. Each family was observed twice, 18 weeks apart, with a third observation planned in 2011.

In analysis, two engagement levels were added to those of previous studies, creating: (i) Unengaged; (ii) Onlooking; (iii) Object Interaction (OI); (iv) Person Interaction (PI); (v) Shared Attention (SA) – an active version of Onlooking where a partner is interacting with an object/activity; (vi) Passive Joint Attention (PJA) – where subject and partner jointly attend to an object, but the subject does not attend to the partner; (vii) Coordinated Joint Attention (CJA) – where the subject and partner both attend to an object, each other, and complete an intention-goal sequence; (viii) Shared Joint Attention (SJA), which is similar to CJA, though lacks a completed intention-goal sequence.

In the rural data, both PJA and CJA have a significant positive correlation (p < 0.05) to word-understanding, as does the sum of all three types of joint attention. The urban data, on the other hand, shows that PI exhibits a stronger positive correlation to word-production, as does the sum of all engagement levels involving partners. The differences between the two cultural groups demonstrate that joint attention is not necessarily a direct predictor of vocabulary development. Possibly, these differences are instead related to family-size and socio-cultural structures in each group.