

Evaluating Observational Contexts for Learning Hard Nouns:

How Word Learning is Measured is Key

Kosta Boskovic & Sumarga H. Suanda

Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut

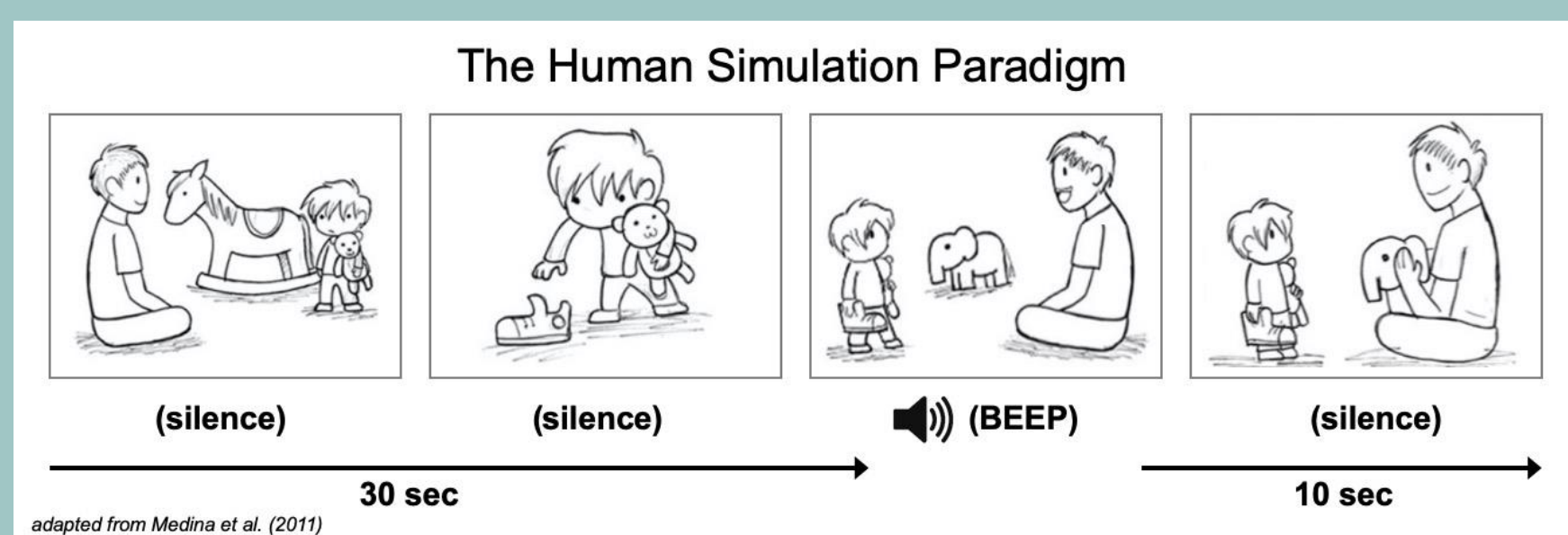
Email: kosta.boskovic@uconn.edu

BACKGROUND



Medina et al. (2011)

- Learning word meanings from their observational contexts is a notoriously difficult task (Bloom, 2000)
- This task is uniquely difficult for words that do not label concrete objects (or “hard words”; Gleitman et al., 2005)



- This difficulty has repeatedly been demonstrated in studies using the “Human Simulation Paradigm” (HSP; Gillette et al., 1999)
- In one HSP study, Kako (2005) revealed that whereas nouns that denote concrete objects were readily learned through their observational contexts alone, nouns that denote less concrete referents (e.g., “toy”, “breakfast”) required access to other kinds of contexts (i.e., linguistic)

CURRENT PROJECT

- Research Goal:** to revisit the role of the observational contexts in the acquisition of nouns that do not label concrete objects (i.e., “hard nouns”)
- In this study, we incorporated several different tests of learning
- We examined whether learners can acquire systematic partial knowledge about hard nouns from their observational contexts even when they fail to acquire their precise meanings

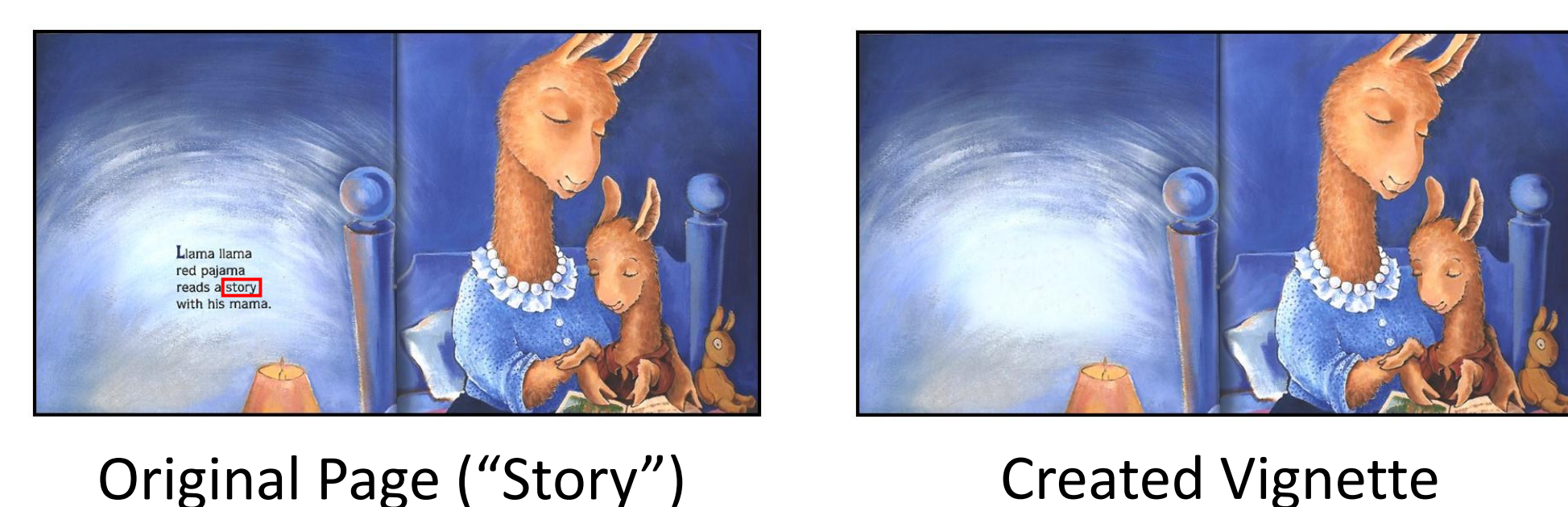
METHODS

Participants

- 120 adults participated in an online study that was built and hosted on Gorilla Experiment Builder (Anwyl-Irvine et al., 2019)

Stimuli

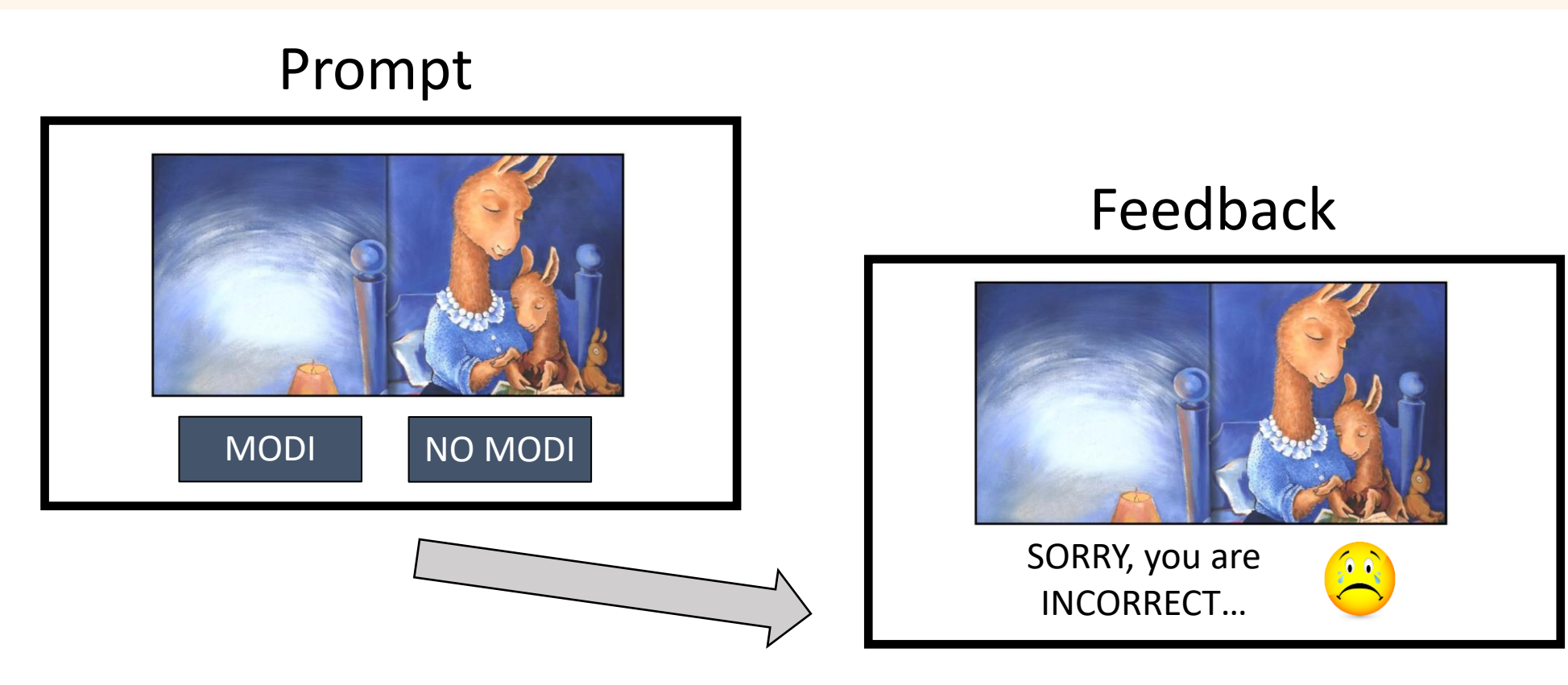
Vignettes



- Target vignette:** static picture book scene (see above) in which the target noun (e.g., “story”) had appeared
- Distractor vignette:** scene in which the target noun had not appeared
- Selected target nouns:** “dinner”, “friend”, “hand”, “morning”, “school”, “story”, “tomorrow”, “toy”, “water”, and “wind”

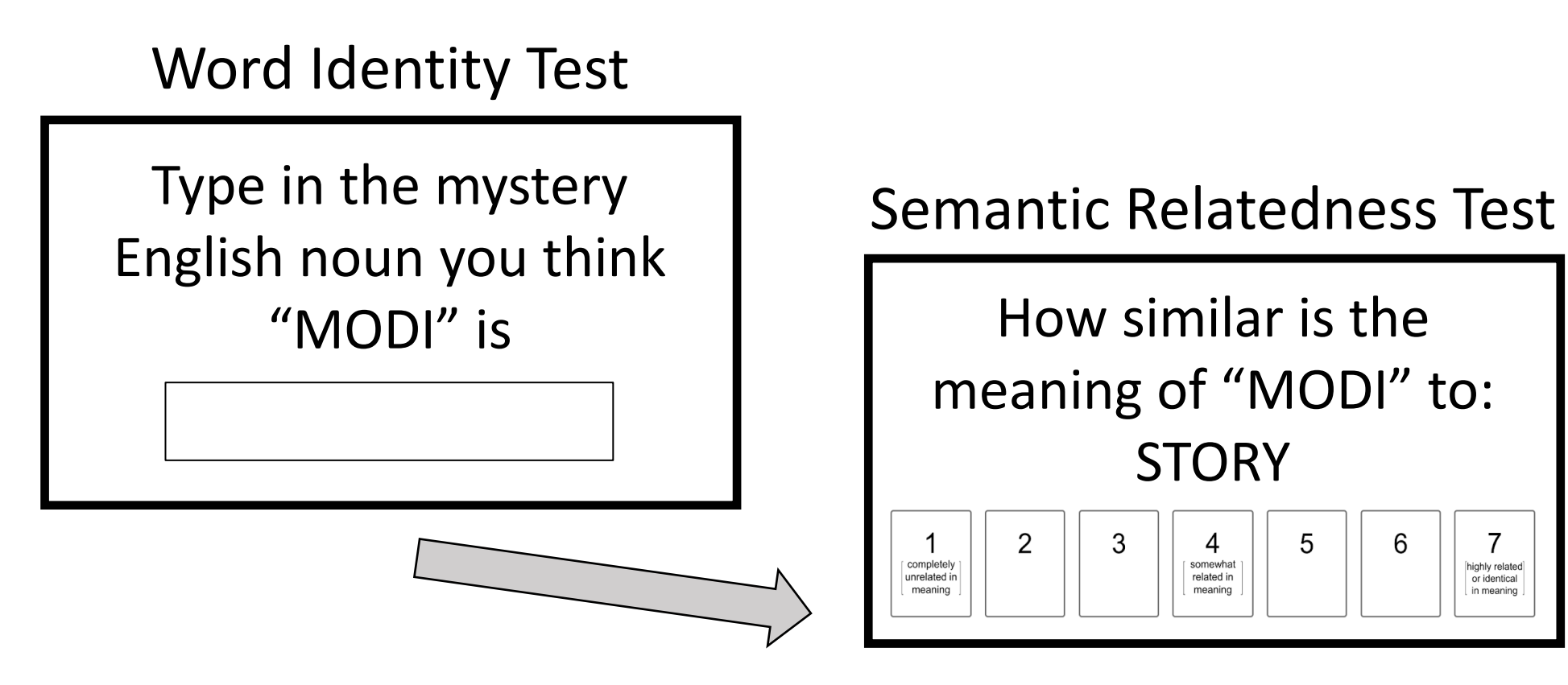
A Multi-Test Design

Categorization Phase



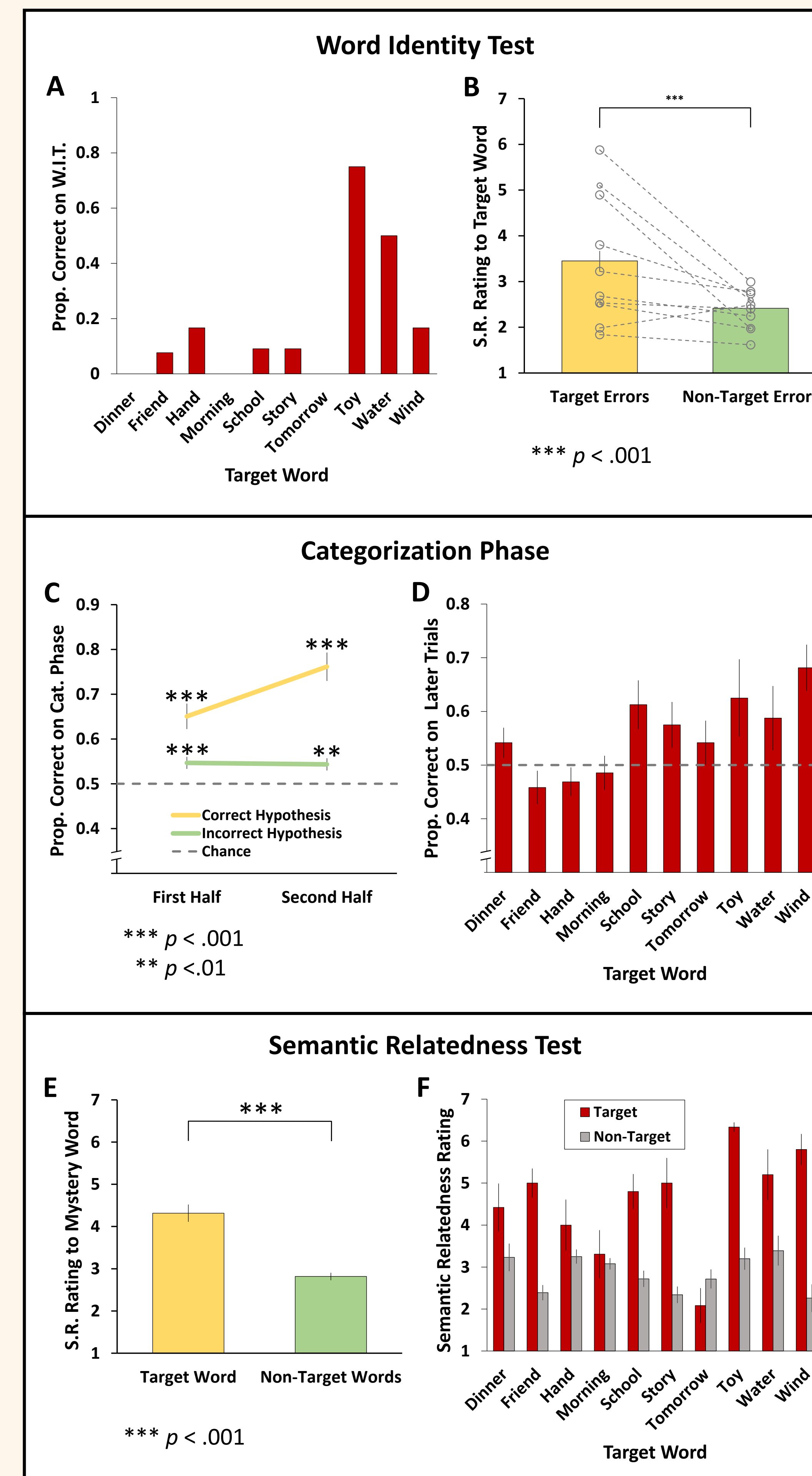
- Participants were shown either a target or distractor vignette and asked whether the mystery word (“MODI”) was present in the original text. Feedback followed each trial
- 32 semi-randomized trials in total (16 targets, 16 distractors)

Testing Phase



- Single word identity test following categorization phase
- 10 semantic relatedness tests, including the target noun

RESULTS



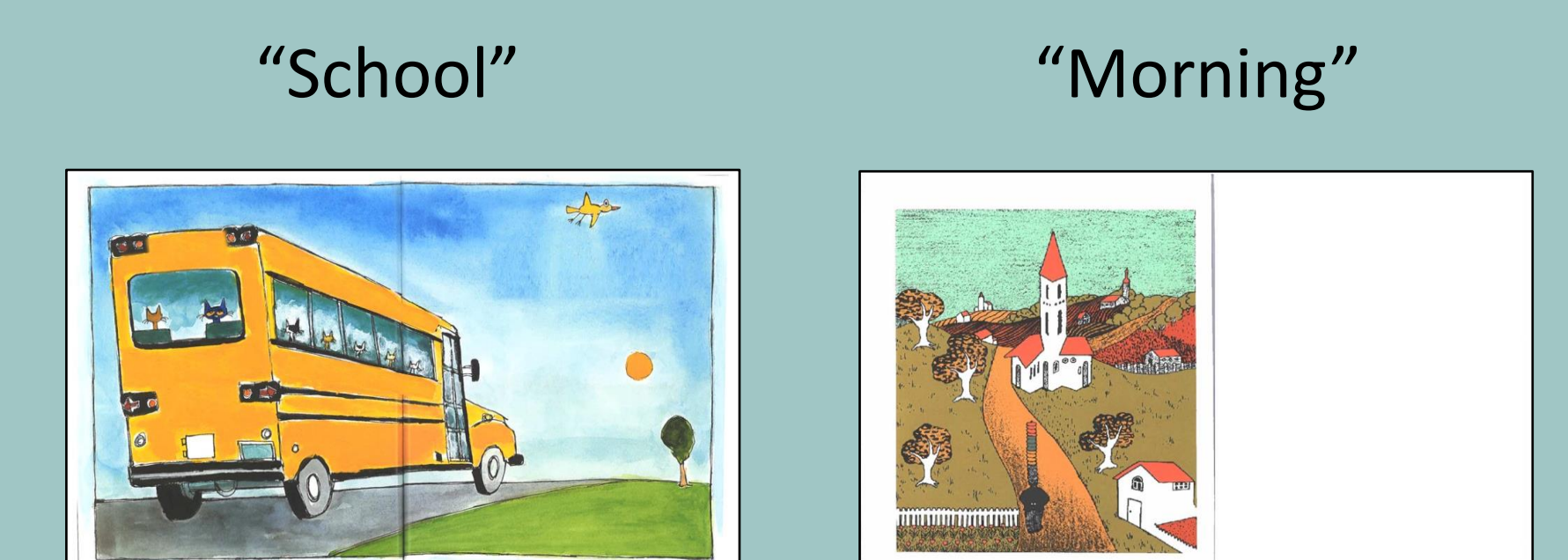
- Most participants failed to guess the mystery word (Fig. A)
- When participants did not learn the precise word, they still:
 - Guessed a word that was semantically related to the target word (Fig. B)
 - Performed significantly better than chance rates throughout the image categorization task (Fig. C-D)
 - Rated the mystery word as more similar to the target noun than to the other nine nouns on the Semantic Relatedness Test (Fig. E-F)
- We observed notable variability in performance across target words in the Word Identity Test (Fig. A), Categorization Phase (Fig. D), and Semantic Relatedness Test (Fig. F)

DISCUSSION

- The role (or lack thereof) of the observational contexts in learning hard words is a matter of great interest (Gleitman et al., 2005; Kako, 2005)
- The current study reveals that the informativity of a particular source of input may depend on how learning is defined and measured
- Results confirm previous findings (e.g., Kako, 2005) that the observational context rarely leads to “full” learning of hard nouns
- Nonetheless, the observational context leads to the systematic acquisition of partial knowledge of hard noun meanings
- This partial knowledge may lay the foundation for full meaning acquisition upon the incorporation of linguistic information

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Probing the nature of the partial knowledge participants acquired
- Measuring learning when the observational contexts are supplemented by linguistic information
- Exploring variability among hard nouns



REFERENCES / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anwyl-Irvine, A.L., Massoné, J., Flitton, A., Kirkham, N., Evershed, J.K. (2019). Gorilla in our midst: An online behavioral experiment builder. *Behavior Research Methods*, 52, 388-407.

Bloom, P. (2000). *How children learn the meaning of words*. MIT Press.

Gillette, J., Gleitman, H., Gleitman, L., & Lederer, A. (1999). Human simulations of vocabulary learning. *Cognition*, 73(2), 135-176.

Gleitman, L. R., Cassidy, K., Nappa, R., Papafragou, A., & Trueswell, J. C. (2005). Hard words. *Language Learning and Development*, 1(1), 23-64.

Kako, E. (2005). Information sources for noun learning. *Cognitive Science*, 29(2), 223-60.

Medina, T. N., Snedeker, J., Trueswell, J. C., & Gleitman, L. R. (2011). How words can and cannot be learned by observation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 108(22), 9014-9019.

We thank Noor Javed and the many members of the UConn Communication and Development Lab for their assistance. We thank the UConn Office for Undergraduate Research for their contributions in providing a Conference Presentation Award. This research was supported by the James S. McDonnell Foundation (JSMF 220020549), The National Institute of Health (R00-HD082358).