

Items and Generalizations at Work

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This presentation will involve two parts. In the first, the emphasis will be on our impressive ability to generalize. New data demonstrates that general linking rules for a novel construction are learnable with minimal exposure; they can be used for both production and comprehension, and the knowledge is retained for at least a week.

Yet at the same time that language is impressively general and creative, we know that it is also impressively repetitive and item-specific. The second part of the presentation will investigate the restricted distribution of adjectives such as *asleep*, *aware* and *afraid*. These adjectives systematically resist appearing prenominaly (*?the asleep boy*). Their behavior provides compelling evidence of our detailed item-specific knowledge, and highlights an important role for historical persistence in synchronic grammar. We come full circle with an observation concerning a-adjectives that further reveals our impressive ability to generalize, even in this very narrowly circumscribed domain.