

## BACKGROUND

Telicity is one of a handful of semantic contrasts that structure the linguistic encoding of events cross-linguistically. **Telic** predicates specify an inherent end-point for an event (such as a result or goal) while **Atelic** predicates lack such an end-point and refer to homogeneous activities and states.

Syntactically, telicity has no direct marker, but is signaled by a variety of syntactic reflexes. One important reflex is transitivity: telic predicates are likely to be transitive while atelic predicates are likely to be intransitive. The connection between transitivity and telicity may have its origins in the syntax (van Hout 1996, Tenny 1994), or it may arise from functional considerations (Hopper & Thompson 1980).

Regardless of its origin, children acquiring English are sensitive to the connection between transitivity and telicity by age 2;10. Wagner (2006) used an event counting procedure that exploits the fact that telic and atelic predicates provide different criteria for event individuation. Results showed good overall understanding of telicity but a persistent bias to link transitive sentences to telic semantics -- even in cases where this was incorrect (e.g., "The dog pushed the ball" is transitive, but atelic).

This previous work was limited, however, by its reliance on familiar English words. Children's performance might reflect only knowledge of links between specific verbs and structures, and not a more abstract understanding of the general relationship between structures and meanings. The current study examines whether children have an abstract representation of the connection between transitivity and telicity which can generalize to unknown, novel verbs.

### This study asks:

- Will children use transitivity information to infer telicity meaning?
- Will they assume a novel verb in a **transitive frame has telic meaning** and generalize based on goal information? Will they assume a novel verb in an **intransitive frame has atelic meaning** and generalize based on manner information?

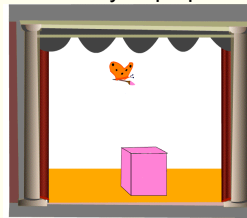
## METHODS

**Participants:** Three-year-olds (N = 16,  $\mu$  = 36 months) and Four-year-olds (N = 18,  $\mu$  = 52 months).

**Task:** A match-to-sample generalization task was used. Children saw four sample movies in which a character achieved a distinctive goal (the **Telic** interpretation: e.g. covering a box with paint) using a distinctive manner (the **Atelic** interpretation: e.g. dripping paint from a brush). The movie was described using a novel verb either **Transitively** ("The bird tarked the box") or **Intransitively** ("The bird tarked"). At test, children were shown two variants of the sample, one which preserved the manner information, and the other which preserved goal information. Children were asked whether the novel verb (in the target frame) applied to each test movie.

### SAMPLE MOVIE

A butterfly drips paint on a box, covering it

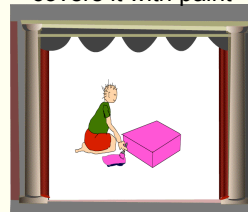


**Transitive Target:**  
"The butterfly tarks the box"

**Intransitive Target:**  
"The butterfly tarks"

### NEW MANNER TEST

A boy sits by a box and covers it with paint

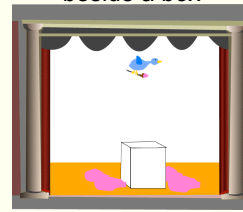


**Transitive:** "Did the boy also tark the box, or did he do something else?"

**Intransitive:** "Did the boy also tark, or did he do something else?"

### NEW GOAL TEST

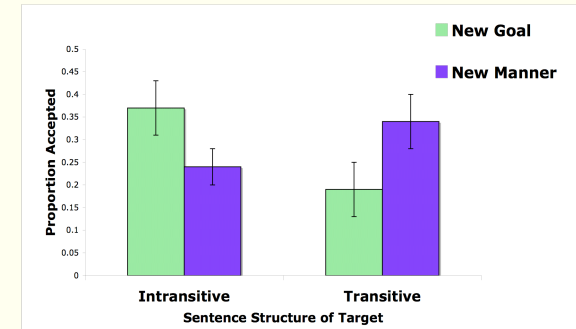
A bird drips paint beside a box



**Transitive:** "Did the bird also tark the box, or did it do something else?"

**Intransitive:** "Did the bird also tark, or did it do something else?"

## RESULTS



- There were no differences between age-groups and their data has been combined.
- Children did use the transitivity of the target sentence in generalizing the novel verb (F (1, 34) = 10.02, p < .003).

• When the sample is described **intransitively**, children accept goal changes more than manner changes. **That is, the intransitive sentence is atelic: it describes a particular manner, irrespective of goal.**

• When the sample is described **transitively**, children accept manner changes more than goal changes. **That is, the transitive sentence is telic: it describes a particular goal, irrespective of manner.**

## DISCUSSION

These results provide further evidence that children rely on structural cues to help them identify aspects of verb meaning; that is, syntax acts as a bootstrap to meaning (Gleitman 1990). Moreover, they suggest that the link between transitivity and telicity is strong enough to support inferences in verb learning. It remains to be studied HOW children acquire this particular link, and how it interacts with other semantic correlates of transitivity, such as causality.