The question the current study aims to investigate is whether there is a difference in the emergence of nouns and verbs in children’s early vocabularies in languages possessing different parameter settings with respect to null arguments. To answer this question, the proportions of nouns and verbs are examined in the speech of children aged 1;7-2;0, 2;1-2;5, and 2;6-2;11 whose native language is English, Mandarin, or Spanish. Because English prohibits null arguments, a large noun bias is expected across all three age groups of English-speaking children. Because Spanish is a pro-drop language which allows for null subjects, a noun bias is expected across all three age groups of Spanish-speaking children – however, the noun bias exhibited by the Spanish-speaking children is expected to be smaller in comparison to that of the English-speaking children. Because Mandarin is a topic-drop language which allows for both null subjects and null objects, a verb bias is expected. However, Mandarin is morphologically transparent – meaning that there are no morphological markings which serve to distinguish nouns from verbs as there are in English and Spanish. As a consequence, for children learning Mandarin, the task of distinguishing nouns from verbs becomes all the more difficult and so neither a consistent noun or verb bias is expected initially but it is expected that Mandarin-speaking children will develop a verb bias at some stage. Given these predictions, it is proposed here that the noun bias is not universal.

In addition to examining the noun bias in children’s early vocabularies, the question of whether children’s speech parallels adult speech with respect to the noun bias arises. To address if it is the input which determines the existence of a noun bias in children’s early vocabularies, the proportions of nouns and verbs are examined in caregivers’ speech whose native language is English, Mandarin, or Spanish. If similar results are found across children and caregiver’s results for a particular language, that would indicate that the input does influence children’s early vocabularies with respect to the noun bias. If the results across children and caregivers vary for a particular language, then the structure of a language is more influential in determining the existence of a noun bias than the input a child receives.

As previous studies have not examined the noun bias in light of language typology, this study is the first to offer insights on how language typology and the noun bias interact. The current study is also significant as it examines the dominance of language structure over input in children’s early vocabularies.