Overextensions

A child’s use of a word in a wider range on contexts than in the target language

General Pattern
1. Underextension; 2. Overextension; 3. Appropriate Use

Piaget Example
At 1;2 (34) he said “bowwow” to a dog, but also to a hen, a cow-bell, cows themselves, guinea pigs and a cat. At 1;3 (5) he said “bowwow” to anything moving, from an ant to a tractor in the field. At 1;3 (13) there a differentiation: “moo” for cows, deer; “kitty” for cats, pigs were either “moo” or “kitty”

Laura Example #1
“ball”
1;0(9) picture of ball in book; 1;0(9) to 1;4 1. a ball; 2. round objects (orange grapefruit, buzzer); 3. Request for servings of liquid in cup

Laura Example #2
“cookie”
1;0(9) for cookies; 1;0(9) to 1;4 Novel round foods (cheerios, cucumber); Record players or music on hi-fi or car radio; Rocking and/or rocking chair; Ice cream.

Basic Questions
What kinds of overextensions?
Are all words overextended?

Two Kinds of Overextensions
Categorical
Application in a higher order category, Examples: ‘dada’ for mother; ‘truck’ for bus; ‘apple’ for orange

Analogical
No clear categorical relation
1. Perceptual, ‘tick tock’ for sound of water
2. Functional, ‘hat’ for basket on head
3. Affective, ‘hot’ for objects that are forbidden to touch

Frequency
Rescorla (1980)
6 children; First 75 words
33% of words overextended
12 words were 29% of overextensions:
   - baby, apple, car, truck, shoe, hat, data, cheese, ball, cat, dog, hot
Categorical most frequent
Earliest words were most overextended
**Comprehension vs. Production**
Thompson & Chapman (1977); 5 children
4 overextended words from each
Picture task to test comprehension
Only 8 of 20 words overextended in comprehension

**5 Explanations**
1. Children have limited symbolic ability
2. Incomplete semantic features, e.g. [+animate, + 4 legs]
3. Limited vocabulary, known for unknown
4. Retrieval problems, earlier word for later word
5. Phonological simplicity, simple word for complex word

**Conclusion**
There may no single reason for overextensions
All five explanations may play a role

**Summary**
Children overextend some but not all words
Most likely with first words
Tend to be categorical in nature
More likely in comprehension than production
Occur due to multiple factors