

Children's Understanding of Non-Literal Language

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Children are constantly learning from the moment they are born, from basic language and communication skills to more complex language nuances. More specifically, this study evaluates the comprehension abilities of non-literal language use of two school aged children, a boy and a girl both age 9. The following analysis will center on how theory of mind, conversational and scalar implicatures, and Gricean Maxims affect a child's ability to understand non-literal language.

It is very common for children to have a difficult time distinguishing between given and new discourse entities, which is to take another person's perspective into account and to identify conversational common ground (Brooks & Kempe, 2012). The first child I interviewed was Alan who is 9-years-old and is an only child. Alan is very witty and throughout my interview he surprisingly understood the majority of jokes I told and comprehended the conversational implicatures with ease. However, when it came to idioms and metaphors the phrasing of the statements was too complex for him to understand without receiving a hint from me or prior teachers. Furthermore, after conducting the interview with Alan I was able to use his semantics to understand the non-literal language used in jokes, idioms, and metaphors.

Caillies and Le Sourn-Bissaoui (2008) investigated the comprehension of idiomatic expressions of school age children, and tested whether this comprehension requires theory of mind competencies. The researchers present the idea that to process figurative language it is crucial to distinguish between two semantic representations, the literal representation and the figurative representation. Understanding that an expression can represent different meanings requires children to be able to represent the relationship between the language and two representations. The ability to understand ambiguous idiomatic expressions depends on

comprehension of false belief and appearance-reality distinction. There are two distinctions between idiomatic expressions: decomposable and nondecomposable expressions. Normally decomposable expressions are expressions in which a part is used literally, e.g., lay down the law. Nondecomposable expressions are the idiomatic meaning that cannot be compositionally derived from the words that compose the string, e.g., kick the boat. Children as young as 5-years-old were able to understand decomposable expressions, while it is not until the age of 7-8 that the comprehension of nondecomposable expressions can be observed. Moreover, the researchers discovered that developmental changes in the comprehension of decomposable expressions by children were predicted by verbal competences and age. In all, to understand figurative language from decomposable expressions by drawing an inference based on the meaning of integral words requires more verbal competencies than theory of mind.

The next child I interviewed was a 9-year-old girl named Kayla. She lives with her mother, father, and older brother. Kayla is a very cheerful child with intelligence through the roof. Similarly to Alan, she understood all of my jokes and surprisingly comprehended the idiom and metaphor just as easily. Although many children have difficulty understanding conversational and scalar implicatures because they do not follow Gricean Maxims rules, which is a set of principles that govern cooperative verbal exchanges of information. Kayla easily understood the scalar implicature of my jokes and noticed the hints that were underlying in each expression I delivered. Although Alan and Kayla are the same age there are distinct differences in their ability to comprehend some figurative language.

Caillies and Le Sourn-Bissaoui (2006) researched if there were any relationships among variables to see if verbal and academic competence were related to idiom comprehension. The researchers assumed that figurative competence requires semantics and a broad lexicon. The

observations made revealed that developmental changes in the comprehension of decomposable expressions by children predicted their grade level. However, the findings also revealed that there is no indication that verbal competence determines comprehension, Thus, being consistent with the researchers' hypothesis that academic learning promotes idiomatic comprehension; word awareness is the competence necessary to understand figurative language such as decomposable expressions. There is also the careful considerations that the developmental changes that occur in idiomatic understanding might be explained by varied developmental factors. Furthermore, around the time a child turns 5 is the time during which children develop more than just language but also their ability to grasp a theory of mind. Although children can understand decomposable expressions from the age of 5, the late comprehension of nondecomposable expressions can be due to general cognitive mechanisms incorporating semantic and pragmatic information and not to acquisition via exposure.

As Alan and Kayla are the same age, I could not use age as a determiner to why they had different levels of comprehension when it came to non-literal language. However, I will cite the differences they do have: gender, bilingualism vs. monolingualism, and the presence of siblings. Many people have strong beliefs that men and women have different ways of communicating; researchers have used meta-analysis as a statistical technique to examine gender differences in individuals of all ages and found a slight advantage for females across 165 studies measuring varying aspects of verbal competence. Although there are differences in talkativeness, affiliative speech, and assertive speech observed it is important to note that these samples do not generalize when people reach adulthood. Another factor that could possibly affect why there was a difference in comprehension between Alan and Kayla is that Kayla speaks two languages: Cantonese and English while Alan only speaks English. This may be a possible explanation

because Kayla has two lexicons and understands more nuances in general. However, the research articles emphasized that it wasn't the amount of words the child knew but their continued academic learning. Moreover, the last distinction between Alan and Kayla was the presence of siblings. Both children are in the same grade and receive thorough attention from their parents and teachers, but Kayla continues to benefit linguistically from her sibling from her interactions with her brother as she grows up. Since she has an older brother that teaches her and guides her through life, he has taught her many non-literal linguistic things that contribute to her thorough knowledge of metaphors and idioms.

Each child's understanding of non-literal language is unique and dependent on their cognitive development. Some children benefit from having an older sibling to teach them things many only children have to discover alone, but in the long run everyone will receive similar educations to learn figurative language. Alan and Kayla are exemplary examples of how amazing children are at learning everything and anything regardless of their different backgrounds and circumstances.

## Reference List

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