

Linguistic means for narrative cohesion in relation to children's theory of mind

Developmental steps and achievements in children's language acquisition have been shown to positively correlate with children's theory of mind, i.e. the ability to take the perspective of another and to infer mental states like beliefs or emotions of somebody in a given scene. Theory of mind is classically seen to develop around the 4th birthday (Wellman 2001).

Linguistic determinants that have been discussed in their ability to help children acquire a theory of mind are general vocabulary, semantics of mental terms, or the syntax of complementation (Astington and Baird 2005). Other accounts propose that discourse – in the form of family conversations or narratives – provides the child with the opportunity to learn about crucial aspects of a theory of mind: differing perspectives of self and others, antecedents and consequences of emotions and desires, or the possible mismatch of someone's belief and reality (Harris 2005; Nelson 2005; O'Neill 2005). Unfortunately, detailed empirical assessments of this latter proposal focusing on linguistic structures of discourse and narrative are still lacking.

The present talk explores the proposal of a connection between growing discourse competence and theory of mind, looking into changes in the use of narrative cohesive devices from 3 to 5 years – i.e. the period, where the major acquisition of theory of mind is said to take place – and investigating their relationships with theory of mind.

40 German children age 3 to 5 produced narrations of a wordless picture book with a socio-emotional story theme. Children's narrations were video-taped and transcribed along the conventions used by Berman and Slobin (1994). They were coded and analyzed for the use of 'clause connectors' – especially coordinating and subordinating temporal and causal conjunctions – and 'stance markers' like intensifying, modal, or epistemic particles and expressions.

The same children completed a battery of different theory of mind tasks, performance on which resulted in an overall theory of mind score.

In a first step, the development of narrative cohesive means is tracked comparing types and tokens as well as combinations of clause connectors and stance markers in the narrations of 3-, 4-, and 5-year old German children.

In a second step, correlational analyses explore the relationships between the usage of different cohesive devices and the theory of mind scores of single children, and results are discussed in terms of their implications for theories and empirical foci of language acquisition research.

References

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