

## Discourse particles and belief reasoning

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Discourse particles typically express the epistemic attitude of discourse participants with respect to the propositional content of an utterance. They encode inferential patterns about relating new information to existing contextual assumptions. The stressed German discourse particle ‘doch’ functions as a marker of belief correction. We tested whether German preschoolers can infer from utterances with ‘doch’ that a speaker is correcting his own belief given that mastery of linguistic constructions for belief representation is just emerging in preschool years. Forty-eight children (4;9-5;3 years; 24 boys, 24 girls) participated in an object-choice task, in which a hand-puppet (i.e. the speaker) was searching for a toy that was hidden in one of two boxes each belonging to an unknown character. We manipulated the belief state of the speaker who expressed either a positive belief (condition 1) or a negative belief (condition 2) concerning whether box A contained the toy (“I believe it’s in this box” vs. “I don’t believe it’s in this box”). Subsequently, in both conditions, the speaker looked inside box A and uttered the same statement marked with the particle ‘doch’ (The toy is DOCH in X’s box). The task for the child was to identify the box that contained the toy. In accordance with an adult control group, there was a significant effect of the polarity of the belief statement on children’s choice ( $F(2) = 10.01, p < 0.001$ ). Children preferred box B in condition 1 (90.6% correct) and box A in condition 2 (70.8% correct). In a third condition we asked whether drawing the inference of belief correction depends on the belief being explicitly expressed or not. We investigated whether participants can also perform the task when they have to infer the speaker’s belief state in an additional inferential step, i.e. when the speaker is looking into box B (rather than A) after having expressed a negative belief about box A. Whereas adults consistently chose box A, children’s choices differed significantly from those of the adult group ( $W = 55, p < 0.05$ ) showing a bimodal response pattern. We argue that the meaning of the discourse particle doch encodes an inferential process of belief reasoning, whose mastery German-learning children acquire gradually.