

Early metaphorical abilities

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Metaphor development has been investigated extensively in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of these experimental studies suggest that children do not understand metaphors until fairly late in development, and often not until quite late into adolescence (see Gibbs, 1994; Nippold, 1988/1998 and Winner, 1988/1997 for reviews).

Yet, these results might be better explained by various confounding factors, rather than reflecting children's poor pragmatic abilities. Such factors include mixing idioms (whose metaphorical content is dead, so not pragmatically recoverable) with live metaphors, not taking sufficient account of children's limited world knowledge (which might block their access to elements of metaphorical meaning), and the difficulty of some of the tasks employed, in particular, tasks that required the children to explain or paraphrase their understanding of metaphors (see, Asch & Nerlove, 1960; Smith, 1976; Winner, Rosenstiel & Gardner, 1976, among many others). Recent work in other areas of children's communicative development, such as their capacity to produce and comprehend certain implicatures (see, e.g., Pouscoulous, Noveck, Politzer & Bastide, 2007), has shown that these kinds of metalinguistic tasks place demands on children which interfere with accurate assessment of their pragmatic abilities (for the use of act-out tasks rather than metalinguistic ones in the acquisition of communicative skills and language, see also Tomasello, 2003, 2008). Indeed, school-aged children's performance with metaphor improves when the task is not metalinguistic (see, e.g., Pearson, 1990 and Waggoner & Palermo, 1989).

We believe there is no *a priori* reason to think young communicators (aged 2;6 – 5;0) do not master the cognitive processes enabling the understanding of metaphors extremely early on. Therefore, the aim of our study will be to investigate the cognitive capacities of children with regard to the understanding and, to a lesser extent, the production of metaphors. How do very young children fare with fully novel metaphors corresponding to their world knowledge and linguistic competences? How early can they be encouraged to spontaneously produce metaphors?

The focus of the comprehension part of the experiment will be on the ability of very young children (from 2;6-year-olds) to understand the metaphorical process (not explain it or report it).

While our main goal is to assess the comprehension abilities of children, we will also include an elicited production task to investigate whether the same children spontaneously produce novel metaphorical labels.