

Metaphor Comprehension in Arabic-Speaking Children: On the Development of Primary and Perceptual Metaphors

Situated within the conceptual metaphor theory (Grady 2005; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), this study explores the emergence of metaphorical understanding in typically developing Arabic-speaking children, an area of research very much still in its infancy. Few studies have sufficiently distinguished different types of metaphors when exploring the emergence of metaphorical understanding in children (Olofson et al., 2014, Stites and Özçalışkan, 2012). This study predicts that metaphor comprehension varies by metaphor type and metaphor conventionality. We ask if primary metaphors that are claimed to be rooted in embodiment and learned early on as the child starts to experience the world (e.g., I *see* your point) differ from perceptual metaphors that are based on perceived similarities between the target and source domains (e.g., Juliet is *the sun*). In addition, the study examines the role of metaphor conventionality (i.e. conventional versus novel metaphors) on metaphor development. This, in return, will show that children may show better understanding of metaphorical expressions and at a younger age than what was reported in earlier studies on metaphor development. While evidence suggests that metaphor development starts when the child is four years (Özçalışkan, 2007, Rundblad and Annaz, 2010), we question which metaphors are actually acquired at age four and argue that it is likely that onset will differ for different types of metaphors, and possibly also between languages.

To establish the development of comprehension of different metaphor types in Arabic, this study tested 87 typically developing children between three and six years of age, and 20 typically developing adults between 18 and 30 on a new metaphor story comprehension task. The task consisted of 20 short stories that contained 20 Arabic metaphors: five conventional primary conceptual metaphors, five novel primary conceptual metaphors, five conventional perceptual metaphors, and five novel perceptual metaphors.

Results show that while onset of metaphor comprehension of perceptual metaphors in this group of Arabic-speaking children was in line with previous studies claiming that metaphor development starts when the child is four years (Özçalışkan, 2007, Rundblad and Annaz, 2010), it importantly shows an even earlier onset of primary metaphor comprehension. For both types, conventional metaphors generated better performance rates than novel metaphors. These results will be discussed in light of studies on English and Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

References

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