
When children are more pragmatic than adults: Norwegian children's comprehension of precise and imprecise absolute adjectives

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Studies in developmental pragmatics have shown that children prefer to derive semantic (or 'literal') interpretations of phenomena such as metaphor, irony, hyperbole or scalar implicatures (Demorest et al, 1983; Noveck, 2001, i.a.). With age, they learn to interpret the intended non-literal meaning of such expressions. However, does this developmental tendency mean that children always go from first grasping the semantic meaning to later learning the intended (pragmatic) meaning of an utterance? The current work addresses this question by investigating the development of comprehending absolute gradable adjectives such as *straight*. These adjectives can have both a precise ("literal") (perfectly straight) and an imprecise ("non-literal") (straight enough) interpretation. Their precise interpretation is generally believed to be part of the adjective's semantic meaning, whereas the imprecise interpretation is seen as a pragmatic adjustment (see Kennedy, 2007, i.a.). We tested 100 native speakers of Norwegian ages 3-8, and 33 adults. Participants saw 12 critical items and 12 fillers on a tablet screen. In each trial, participants heard an instruction to select a picture. They saw three pictures including a distractor referent, a target referent (precise, imprecise or incorrect control picture) and a red X, signifying that neither of the two pictures was the correct referent (See Figure 1). The Experiment had CONDITION (three levels: precise, imprecise, control), AGE (continuous predictor measured in days) and their interaction as fixed effects. We fitted a mixed-effects, 'maximal' logistic regression model to the data. We found an interaction between CONDITION (precise vs. imprecise levels) and AGE (z -value= 2.4, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that, with age, children were less likely to tolerate imprecise interpretations. Adults were significantly less likely to tolerate imprecision relative to the youngest age group (3-to 4-year-olds). Overall, our findings suggest that children behave more pragmatically than adults when understanding imprecision, and that only with age do they become less tolerant of imprecise interpretations of absolute adjectives.

References: • Demorest, A., Silberstein, L., Gardner, H., & Winner, E. (1983). Telling it as it isn't: Children's understanding of figurative language. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 1(2), 121-134. • Kennedy, C. (2007). Vagueness and grammar: The semantics of relative and absolute gradable adjectives. *Linguistics and philosophy*, 30(1), 1-45. • Noveck, I. A. (2001). When children are more logical than adults: Experimental investigations of scalar implicature. *Cognition*, 78(2), 165-188.