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Beliefs about beliefs: Representation and constraining function of wrong beliefs in young children's understanding of deception

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Abstract

Understanding of another person's wrong belief requires explicit representation of the wrongness of this person's belief in relation to one's own knowledge. Three to nine year old children's understanding of two sketches was tested. In each sketch subjects observed how a protagonist put an object into a location x and then witnessed that in the absence of the protagonist the object was transferred from x to location y. Since this transfer came as a surprise they had to assume that the protagonist still believed that the object was in x. Subjects had to indicate where the protagonist will look for the object at his return. None of the 3-4-year old, 57% of 4-6-year old, and 86% of 6-9-year old children pointed correctly to location x in both sketches. Of the many cases where 4-6-year olds made an error they failed in only about 20% to *remember* the initial location correctly. As a test of the stability of children's representation of the

protagonist's wrong belief the sketches continued with a statement about the protagonist's intention to either deceive an antagonist or truthfully inform a friend about the object's location. Independent of age, of those children who correctly thought that the protagonist would search in x, 85% of the time they also correctly thought that he would direct his antagonist to location y and his friend to location x. This shows that once children can represent a person's beliefs they can *constrain* their interpretation of this person's stated intentions to the person's beliefs. In a more story-like situation another group of children had to infer a deceptive plan from the depiction of a goal conflict between two story characters and one character's expedient utterance. At the age of 4–5 years children correctly judged this utterance as a lie only 28% of the time while 5–6-year olds did so 94% of the time. These results suggest that around the ages of 4 to 6 years the ability to represent the relationship between two or more person's epistemic states emerges and becomes firmly established.

Résumé

Comprendre que ce que croit un tiers est erroné requiert une représentation explicite de cette fausse croyance en relation avec son savoir propre.

On a testé la compréhension de deux sketches par des enfants de 3 à 9 ans. Dans chacun des sketches les sujets observent un protagoniste placer un objet dans un lieu \hat{x} , puis sont témoins du transfert de cet objet de \hat{x} en \hat{y} en l'absence du protagoniste. Ce transfert doit causer une surprise chez le protagoniste dont on assume qu'il croit que l'objet se trouve toujours en \hat{x} . Les sujets doivent dire si le protagoniste va chercher l'objet. Aucun 3–4 ans n'indique correctement le lieu \hat{x} , 57% des 4–6 ans et 86% des 6–9 ans le font. Parmi les nombreuses erreurs des 4–6 ans seules 20% sont attribuables à une incapacité de se souvenir du lieu \hat{x} . Pour tester la stabilité de la représentation de la croyance erronée, on dit que le protagoniste a l'intention soit de tromper un adversaire soit d'informer un ami sur le lieu où se trouve l'objet. Indépendamment de leur âge, les enfants ayant donné des réponses correctes disent correctement dans 85% des cas que le protagoniste conduirait l'adversaire en \hat{y} et l'ami en \hat{x} . Lorsque les enfants se représentent les croyances d'une personne, ils peuvent faire dépendre leurs interprétations des intentions exprimées par celles-ci à partir de ses croyances.

Dans une situation de type histoire, un autre groupe d'enfants doit inférer un essai de tromperie à partir de la représentation d'un but conflictuel entre deux des

compétence à partir de la représentation d'un but conflictuel entre deux des personnages de l'histoire tactique d'un des personnages. À 4–5 ans les enfants ne jugent correctement cet acte comme mensonger que dans 28% des cas alors qu'à 5–6 ans on a 94% de réponses correctes. Les résultats indiquent que vers 4–6 ans la capacité de représenter une relation entre les états psychiques de deux personnes ou plus émerge et se confirme.



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