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Idiom comprehension and metapragmatic knowledge in French children

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Abstract

This study looks at children's comprehension of idiomatic expressions and metapragmatic knowledge. Idiomatic expressions are expressions where there is a considerable difference between what is said (literal interpretation) and what is meant (idiomatic interpretation). In other words, the meaning of an idiomatic expression depends largely on a convention that relates a given linguistic form to a given meaning. Using this framework, the present study aims to determine the role of contextual characteristics and the linguistic convention (i.e. the arbitrary link between literal meaning and the non-literal meaning) in the comprehension of idiomatic expressions by 6- and 9-year-old children, and by an adult control group. Subjects performed a story completion task (comprehension task), and a task of metapragmatic knowledge to justify their chosen answers. Two features of the stories were varied: the context (idiomatic vs. literal) and the idiom familiarity level (familiar vs. unfamiliar). The main results can be

summarized as follows : (1) Regardless of age, the context had a substantial impact on idiom comprehension; (2) Linguistic convention had an effect at 9 but not at 6, and was particularly strong in adults; (3) The role of familiarity also appeared in the 9-year-olds and continued on into adulthood; (4) Metapragmatic knowledge varied with the characteristics of the communicative situation, and the content of these responses changed with age: there was a progressive increase in metapragmatic knowledge of linguistic convention as age increased.



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Keywords

Pragmatic; Children; Comprehension; Idiom

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