

Developmental Psycholinguistic Approach to Conversational Skills: A Continuum of the Sensitivity to Gricean Maxims

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Abstract : Background: Our experimental pragmatic study confirms a basic tenet in the Relevance of theoretical views in language philosophy. It draws up a developmental trajectory of the maxims, revealing the cognitive difficulty of their interpretation, their relative place to each other, and the order they may follow in development. A central claim of the present research is that social-cognitive skills play a significant role in inferential meaning construction. Children passing the False Belief Test are significantly more successful in tasks measuring the recognition of the infringement of conversational maxims. Aims and method: We examine preschoolers' conversational and pragmatic competence in view of their mentalization skills. To do so, we use a measure of linguistic tasks containing 5 short scenarios for each Gricean maxim. We measure preschoolers' ToM performance with a first- and second-order ToM task and compare participants' ability to recognize the infringement of the Gricean maxims in view of their social cognitive skills. Results: Findings suggest that Theory of Mind has a predictive force of 75% concerning the ability to follow Gricean maxims efficiently. ToM proved to be a significant factor in predicting the group's performance and success rates in 3 out of 4 maxim infringement recognition tasks: in the Quantity, Relevance and Manner conditions, but not in the Quality trial. Conclusions: Our results confirm that children's communicative competence in social contexts requires the development of higher-order social-cognitive reasoning. They reveal the cognitive effort needed to recognize the infringement of each maxim, yielding a continuum of their cognitive difficulty and trajectory of development.

Keywords : developmental pragmatics, social cognition, preschoolers, maxim infringement, Gricean pragmatics

Conference Title : ICSLD 2025 : International Conference on Speech and Language Development

Conference Location : Barcelona, Spain

Conference Dates : June 10-11, 2025