Grice’s children: Investigations into the development of pragmatic abilities.

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Recent developmental research on social cognition indicates that pragmatics plays a grounding role in the development of children's communicative skills even before they utter their first words (see the work by Csibra, Gergerly and colleagues, and by Tomasello and colleagues, summed up in part in Tomasello 2008). Furthermore, much evidence in language acquisition suggests that young children could not learn to speak without impressive pragmatic abilities (e.g., Tomasello 2003; Bloom 2000; Clark 2003). In stark contrast with this picture, linguistic pragmatic inferences (e.g., reference assignment, implicatures, metaphors, presuppositions and irony) appear to develop later than other linguistic abilities. This talk tries to reconcile the development of these two types of pragmatic abilities by presenting new data on three linguistic pragmatic phenomena with which children fare better than was previously thought: scalar implicature, presupposition and metaphor.

According to pragmatic theories (e.g., Grice, 1975/1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995), inferences involved in understanding various types of implicit and non-literal meanings require (a) intention reading, (b) taking into account common ground (or mutual knowledge), (c) and at least some degree of cooperation. Empirical findings suggest that prelinguistic children already master these skills. Several studies have shown that infants see others as intentional agents (Gergely et al., 2002), that they recognise (communicative) intentions (Behne et al., 2005a; Behne et al., 2005b) and that even 2-year-olds pay attention both to informative and communicative intention (Shwe & Markman, 1997). From 14 or 18 months of age, toddlers take into account the common ground between them and their interlocutor in a communicative context (e.g., Moll et al., 2008; Liebal et al., 2009). Finally, toddlers have been shown to be helpful and cooperative (e.g., Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). Words and syntax, it seems, are all there is left to learn for children to become perfect little ‘Gricean’ comprehenders, and to understand implicatures, presuppositions and metaphors.

Yet, prior developmental research on these phenomena suggest otherwise. For instance, expressions giving rise to scalar implicatures (e.g., some) appear to be given a literal – logical – interpretation by children until fairly late (9 to 11-years-old); some is understood as compatible with the stronger term, all, rather than excluding it as adults do (Noveck, 2001). Similarly, non-literal expressions tend to be interpreted literally by younger children (see, Winner, 1988/1997, Nippold, 1988/1998 and Gibbs, 1994, for a review). Finally, presuppositions triggered by additive particles such as too, do not seem to be taken into account by younger comprehenders (Bergsma, 2006). I will present evidence showing these pragmatic phenomena might be understood much earlier than prior results suggest, and that several factors – independent of children’s pragmatic abilities per se – may explain children’s apparent struggle with pragmatic inferences.