Assessment of Pragmatic Abilities in adolescents: A computerized system to investigate semantic and contextual inferences

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ability to use semantic analysis and inference from context in a situation of language comprehension (Gibbs, 1991, Levorato & Cacciari, 1999). To this aim, we elaborated an original computerized assessment system - stemming from experimental research - allowing simulating an ecological communication situation through small movies placing the participant at the center of interaction. We will present the first data obtained with this original tool.

The experimental design took the form of a comprehension task of idiomatic expressions (Cain, Towse & Knight, 2009). Idioms are figurative expressions that frequently occur in spoken and written communication, and which can (usually) have both a literal and a figurative meaning, depending on the context. The use of idioms is thus an extremely interesting linguistic phenomenon because it provides the ideal material for operationalizing the difference between what is said and what is meant according to context. Moreover, a unique feature of this work was our use of idioms that were translations of European idioms for which no French equivalents were known (Cain, Oakhill, & Lemmon, 2005). This characteristic enabled us to assess idiom processing without the confound of prior knowledge. We manipulated whether the idioms were transparent or opaque, and whether they were presented in a supportive narrative context (i.e., which induced an idiomatic interpretation of the expression) or in a non-informative one.

The experimental materials consisted of twelve movies that end with one character talking to the participant and producing an idiomatic expression. The participant watched each movie, and then, an off-screen’s voice asked him/her to tell what the speaker wanted to mean by answering the question: “what does she/he wanted you to understand”?

Three age groups of adolescents (11, 13 and 15 years of age) participated to this study in a within-subject factors procedure. All of the adolescents spoke French as their first language. In addition, undergraduate students completed the idiom comprehension tasks. Our study demonstrated gradual improvement in idiom comprehension during adolescence. These results supported literature (Nippold & Martin, 1989; Nippold et Rudzinski, 1993; Cain Towse & Knight, 2009), and went beyond as regards abilities to use both semantic analysis and inference from context to understand idioms. Adolescents were able to use semantic analysis to establish transparent idiomatic meanings; and done inference from context to support their
comprehension of opaque idioms. Furthermore, the findings revealed a general facilitator effect of the context in adolescents’ comprehension including for transparent idioms.

This assessment showed the dynamic interplay between semantic and contextual inferences in everyday practice of interactional language use.

References:


