
Does children's early literalist behavior stem from difficulties with metaphor comprehension?

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Abstract

Children's literalist responses to metaphor comprehension tasks are often taken to indicate a protracted development for metaphor acquisition. We investigate whether this observed literalism stems from difficulties with metaphor or signals a preference for literal interpretations in young children instead. We tested 3-to-7-year-olds' metaphor comprehension performance on novel functional, attributional, and psychological metaphors. Children appear to have derived metaphorical interpretations successfully when no literal responses were available (Experiment 1); however, when literal options were available, children chose them almost exclusively (Experiment 2). Contrary to what was previously assumed, young children's observed literalism is unlikely explained by a metaphor comprehension deficit.

Keywords: metaphor, literal bias, children

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