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Irony comprehension in Italian Sign Language: a developmental study.

Introduction

In spoken languages, irony comprehension emerges at about age 6 (Ackerman 1983), with ironic criticisms (IrCrit: positive remarks in negative situations) being easier and acquired earlier than ironic compliments (IrComp: negative remarks in positive situations). As for predictors of irony comprehension, some authors claim that specific Theory of Mind (ToM) abilities are required, in particular 2nd order ignorance (Sullivan et al. 1995), even though ToM development is tightly linked to linguistic abilities (Happè 1995). Other emphasize the role of conversational experiences (Dews, Winner et al. 1996), that can straightforwardly explain the fact that IrCrit, the most common form of irony, is better understood.

The literature on irony comprehension (and production) by Deaf signers is lacking. The purpose of the present study was to start filling this gap investigating irony comprehension in LIS. It was our aim to analyse (i) whether irony comprehension in LIS shows a similar pattern to that of irony comprehension in spoken languages; (ii) which abilities (ToM, linguistic) better predict irony comprehension.

Methods

Ten native LIS signers participated (Mean Age: 9y;2m; Range: 7y;5m – 11y;7m).
As linguistic task, we asked children to narrate a six-pictures story. We used mean length of utterances (MLU) as indicator of linguistic proficiency. FIRST and 2nd order ToM skills were assessed. The irony comprehension task consisted of 10 stories, signed by a Deaf native signer and video-recorded, concluding with a remark, literal (4) or ironic (6: 3-criticisms; 3-compliments). After watching each story, children were asked three questions about i) context (control), ii) understanding of signer's meaning; iii) recognition of signer's attitude.

Results

Accuracy on literal stories was 89.3%, on ironic stories 59.4%. Children could satisfactorily perform the task when the final remark had literal interpretation.

Ironic stories. Accuracy on questions ii) and iii) was analysed using mixed logit models with random intercepts for each subject. As predictors, we entered age, MLU and type of remark (IrCrit vs. IrComp). Only MLU predicts accuracy (β=1.19, SE=0.32, z=3.66, p<.001). Accuracy increases as MLU increases. As for ToM, the situation was diverse, e.g. one child with no ToM had 58% accuracy on the irony test, as another with first and second order ToM. The only child with 100% accuracy passed first order ToM task only.

Discussion

Irony comprehension is a complex skill, which seems not to be fully mastered by our sample of school-aged Deaf native signers. Importantly, irony comprehension skills were predicted by linguistic abilities. Our small sample of children suggests that ToM abilities per se do not constitute a good predictor of irony. Noticeably, the discrepancy between comprehension of IrCrit and IrComp did not show up. Further investigation should delineate the kind of experience Deaf children have with ironic statements. Reduced access to TV due to scarce subtitle services and reduced reading experience due to the difficulties that Deaf children experience in reading development, might result in a reduced exposition to all instances of irony, which could lead to the observed developmental delay and the peculiar pattern of results here reported.

References

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