Children’ sensitivity to some – but not all – Gricean Maxims

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ELM 2020 - Experiments in Linguistic Meaning
Are children’s sensitive to unmotivated violations of Gricean Maxims?

Grice (1968): Cooperative speakers tend to adhere to Conversational Maxims;

Children up to 5 years do not compute implicatures that arise from a motivated (apparent or manifest) violation of the Conversational Maxims;
Experimental design
[Modification of Surian’s Conversational Violation Task]

Here is what Bruno ate for breakfast this morning.

I ate an apple.

What did you eat this morning?

➢ Has Bruno given a good answer?

GOOD

SO-AND-SO

BAD
Material

12 control sentences (8 TRUE and 4 FALSE).

12 critical items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Quantity_Conjuncts</td>
<td>I ate an apple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Quantity_Superset</td>
<td>I received a present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Relation</td>
<td>My favorite shirt has a hole for the head and two sleeves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manner_Order</td>
<td>I went to bed and I brushed my teeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manner_Brief</td>
<td>I ate a fruit with a yellow peel and that monkeys love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maximize Presupposition</td>
<td>A sun is shining (Schlenker, 2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
163 monolingual Italian speaking children:
   45 preschoolers (22 F), MA: 5;2;
   118 school aged children (68 F), MA 7;6
      40 1st graders;
      30 2nd graders;
      48 3rd graders.

36 adults.
Results
silver + bronze medal = rejection

[no difference among groups in control items (all >92%)]
ADULTS always reject unmotivated violations of the QUANTITY and of the RELATION maxim; they are more tolerant with respect to violations of the MANNER maxim and of MAXimize PRESupposition principle.
CHILDREN are in general more tolerant, but exhibit the same pattern as adults: violations of the QUANTITY and of the RELATION maxim are equally sanctioned, more than of the MANNER maxim and of the MAXimize PRESupposition principle.
➢ A clear evolutionary trend emerges

significant difference between adults and primary-school children (Est=1.23354, SE=.29264, z=4.215, p<.0001) and between primary-school children and pre-school children (Est=-1.42221, SE=0.26076, z=-5.454, p<.0001).
Discussion

Gricean Maxims are not the same:

[Violations of QUALITY are always recognized, even by younger children => FALSE controls]

Violations of QUANTITY and RELEVANCE are always penalized by adults, and to a high degree by children;

Violations of MANNER and of MAXimize PRESuppositions are less sanctioned.
Thanks!

CHAT ON
DAY 2, 9/17,
1-2.30 EST