

Early metaphorical abilities
Nausicaa Pouscoulous & Michael Tomasello

SCIENTIFIC REPORT FOR THE THIRD VISIT:
Nausicaa Pouscoulous went to Leipzig, 12-27 April 2011.
Short visit grant n° **4160**

Description of the proposed project

Metaphor development has been investigated extensively in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of these experimental studies suggest that children do not understand metaphors until fairly late in development, and often not until quite late into adolescence (see Gibbs, 1994; Nippold, 1988/1998 and Winner, 1988/1997 for reviews).

Yet, these results might be better explained by various confounding factors, rather than reflecting children's poor pragmatic abilities. Recent work in other areas of children's communicative development, such as their capacity to produce and comprehend certain implicatures, has shown that some experimental tasks place demands on children which interfere with accurate assessment of their pragmatic abilities.

We believe there is no *a priori* reason to think young communicators (aged 2;6 – 5;0) do not master the cognitive processes enabling the understanding of metaphors extremely early on. Therefore, the aim of our study will be to investigate the cognitive capacities of children with regard to the understanding and, to a lesser extent, the production of metaphors. How do very young children fare with fully novel metaphors corresponding to their world knowledge and linguistic competences? How early can they be encouraged to spontaneously produce metaphors?

The focus of the comprehension part of the experiment will be on the ability of very young children (from 2;6-year-olds) to understand the metaphorical process (not explain it or report it).

While our main goal is to assess the comprehension abilities of children, we will also include an elicited production task to investigate whether the same children spontaneously produce novel metaphorical labels.

Aim of the first visit

During the two previous visits the procedure for the experiment was established and piloted. Since the last visit during spring 2010, the metaphor experiment was run with twenty-four German speaking children participants aged 3;0 to 3;4, and the preference test control was run with an additional twelve children aged 3;0 to 3;3. Therefore, the aim of this visit was to analyse the data and prepare the findings for dissemination in scientific conferences and workshops (e.g. the XPrag conference in Barcelona in June 2-4). Additionally, we intended to discuss the best way to understand the results and write up a journal article reporting our work.

Description of the work carried out during the visit and main results obtained

The statistical analysis of the data was carried out. The findings turn out to be quite interesting and in line with our expectations. They indicate that children as young as three years of age can understand metaphors – the youngest age yet found – provided these are novel, appropriate to their age and simple enough.

These results were discussed and the participants agreed on the best way to write up the study for publication. The relevant literature review was carried out, the best way to present the data was decided upon and the future directions of research were suggested. The writing up of the paper was started.

Furthermore, the experiment and its output were also put into adequate format for scientific dissemination in conferences. For instance, this work will be presented as poster at XPrag 2011.

Future collaboration with host institution

The collaborators will work together to finish the paper and insure that it gets published. Future collaborations on this topic have been envisaged, but there are no concrete plans yet.

Projected publications/articles resulting or to result from your grant

The results of this experiment will be published in a peer-reviewed developmental journal. We plan to submit the manuscript within the next couple of months.