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Childrens expectations of reciprocity in referential communication

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Abstract

Speakers often violate conversational expectations by offering less information than listeners need (Grice, 1975). Although children appear sensitive to such violations as comprehenders (Gweon & Asaba, 2018; Katsos & Bishop, 2011), it is unclear how they would respond to them in a reciprocal conversational setting. Here, we ask whether children tailor the informativeness of their speech based on the informativeness of an interlocutor in a prior interaction. In an informativeness rating task, 4- and 5-year-old children evaluated the utterances of an informative and an under-informative interlocutor. Then, in a referential communication task, roles were reversed, and children produced referential descriptions for either the informative or the under-informative interlocutor. Results showed that although children were sensitive to conversational violations, they did not tailor their utterances to their interlocutors informativeness. Although preliminary, these findings suggest that cooperative expectations in linguistic exchanges might differ from those underlying broader (non-linguistic) social action.