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Authors

Grigoroglou, Myrto
Ganea, Patricia

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Acquiring the meaning of conditionals

Myrto Grigoroglou

University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Patricia Ganea

University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Children acquire conditionals late for reasons that are poorly understood. One possibility is because conditionals have multiple meanings. For instance, the statement “If he goes out without an umbrella, he will get wet” is logically true when he goes out without an umbrella and he gets wet (conjunction), when he goes out with an umbrella and does not get wet (bi-conditional) and when he goes out with an umbrella and (still) gets wet (conditional). Here, we employ a new paradigm to test these interpretations in young children. Eighty 3-6-year-olds were asked to match an if-then statement with one of two pictures: 1 depicting a scenario where the conditional is false vs. one of the 3 scenarios where the conditional is true. Results show that children had a conjunctive interpretation since age 3 but the development of the other two interpretations is protracted until after age 5, with great inter-subject variation.