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Children's Developing Understanding of Spatial Metaphors for Time

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Abstract: Adult speakers of English use three different metaphor types to describe time, including moving-time ('summer approaches'), moving-ego ('we approach summer'), and sequence-as-relative-position-on-a-path ('autumn follows summer'). When do children grasp the meaning of these three metaphors for time and what cognitive and/or linguistic factors account for this understanding? To explore these questions, we interviewed 60 three- to six-year-old children as they participated in experimental tasks testing comprehension and production of time metaphors. We found that children could understand all three time metaphors by age five and verbally explain their meanings by age 6. Children's comprehension also varied by metaphor type, with moving-time and moving-ego metaphors being learned earlier than sequence-as-relative-position-on-a-path metaphors. Moreover, children's metaphor comprehension was strongly correlated with their time concept understanding. Overall, these results suggest that comprehension of time metaphors is an early emerging linguistic ability that is closely associated with children's cognitive understanding of the time concept.