

MAKALE ELEŞTİRİSİ / ARTICLE REVIEW

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Bernicot, Josie, Laval, Virginie, Chaminaud, St  phanie, (2007).
Çocuklarda Mecazi Dil Gelişimi: Mecazi Anlamlar Edimbilimsel ve Meta-
edimbilimsel D  zeyde Hangi Sırayla Edinilir? Journal of Pragmatics 39 (2007) 2115-
2132.

Bernicot, Josie, Laval, Virginie, Chaminaud, St  phanie, (2007).
“Nonliteral language forms in children: In what order are they required in pragmatics
and metapragmatics?” Journal of Pragmatics 39 (2007) 2115-2132

Non – literal or figurative language has posed significant challenges for language comprehension theories since it is not the literal meaning we need to understand. Speakers who say what they intend to express in non – literal language actually make us think the other way round. This type of language offers some difficulties both for adults who acquired at least one language and for children who are still in acquisition process. Traditional view for literal and non – literal language is defined by Gibbs and Colston (2006: 837):

“Traditional assumption in many academic disciplines is that literal meaning is primary and the product of default language comprehension. Thus, in psycholinguistic terms, the human language processor is designed for the analysis of literal meanings. Non - literal, indirect and figurative meanings are secondary products, and dependent on some prior analysis of what words and expressions literally mean.”

Although there are contemporary views such as Giora’s (2003) salience hypothesis, which is similar to the traditional view, or Gibbs’ (1994) direct access, which states figurative language may be interpreted as readily as nonfigurative

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discourse, it might be plausible for the researchers in this present article to adopt the traditional view since all children go through the same process in which literal language comprehension precede non – literal language comprehension. Children's ability to think abstract images begin after the age 10 or so, until that age, most of them are programmed to think concretely. This holds for the language production and comprehension. They first attribute literal meaning to words and sentences, and then they begin to think figuratively.

This article studies the non – literal language acquisition by children. From three different age groups, that are 6, 8 and 10, and three different non – literal language forms, idioms, indirect requests and conversational implicatures (semantic – inference implicatures and sarcastic – inference implicatures), the order for comprehension and metapragmatic knowledge, which can be defined as the ability to think about the link between linguistic structures and production, (Mey, 2001) is analyzed. The aim is to determine how these non – literal language comprehension are ordered and then to define the metapragmatic knowledge order for these forms. Using an experiment design which include a story completion task like a puzzle, the study asks children to complete the story (for comprehension part) and to explain why they choose it (metapragmatic knowledge). Non – literal form order for comprehension is semantic – inference implicatures, indirect requests, idioms and sarcastic – inference implicatures and for metapragmatic knowledge, the order is idioms, implicatures and indirect requests.

The study combines three different non – literal language forms, idioms, indirect requests and conversational implicatures, which have been studied separately in previous articles, and tests how these forms are comprehended with an experiment which will be explained later. This provides readers with a compiled literature on the subject. Anyone who is interested in non – literal language acquisition would find various studies and results in this article. Apart from this, explanations and examples regarding these forms seem satisfactory; the researchers explain the need for further experiments on the field and aims to fill the gap with their experiments. However, there seem some methodological shortcomings in this section.

Participants are divided into three groups: 6, 8 and 10 years old. Researchers have given detailed information about the age of the youngest and the eldest child in a group. For instance, there is a 6 – year old child and 7 year 11 months child in the group of 6, there is an 8 year 2 months child and 9 year 9 months child in the group of 8 and finally the youngest boy in 10 year group is 10 year 3 months and the eldest one is 11 years 3 months. This could be a problem in the experiment. There seem an unequal age gap between the groups, i.e. the youngest child in 8 year old group is

only 3 months older than the eldest boy in 6 year old group or the eldest child in 8 year group is only 4 months younger than the youngest child in 10 year group. Although there are only three or four months between them, they are treated as if there are two years between them. There might be no differences between the answers taken from the youngest one of 8 and eldest one of 6. Their cognitive development could be similar. This unequal age gap among the groups could be prevented if the researchers used children with few age gaps. By this way, it would be easier to test the cognitive and non – literal language developments of these children more accurately.

Second criticism could be directed at the experiment design. Researchers have used a story completion task. There are sixteen stories presented in the comic strip format and they all contain non – literal forms mentioned earlier. For each story, there are four pictures: the first one depicts the interaction setting; the second one shows the production of the target utterance and the final two pictures gives children two possible endings. A detailed design is explained in Table 1 and 2. For instance, the idiom ‘change your tune’ is presented within a context and after children understand what the context is, they are asked to choose one of the two pictures: one depicting the literal meaning, i.e. changing the music and putting some other music, the other one depicting the figurative meaning, i.e. talking about something else. Children are expected to choose one of them and complete the puzzle with the help of touch screen. Although using Walt Disney characters and a puzzle in the experiment increases the interest, making the children choose one of the two endings might be rather directive and restricting. With this, children’s ability to interpret the situation or non – literal language form is realized by the options defined by researchers. Children, with this design, are to choose one of them regardless of their real thoughts about the language form. Even if they have no idea, their choices are scored for the comprehension part. That could be the reason for the different orders obtained in comprehension and metapragmatic knowledge. Metapragmatic knowledge data is collected after the comprehension task with the question of ‘*why did you choose this?*’ Comprehension data is collected with this seemingly directive and restricting way. Instead of asking ‘*what would you choose?*’, ‘*what would you do now?*’ without presenting the possible endings could be more distant from being directive to test whether children really understand this type of form.

Other question regarding the experiment design could be about the literal and non – literal meanings ascribed to the forms. There are sixteen stories and four types of non – literal language forms. That means for every form, there are four stories. However, due to the page limitations, only one detailed experiment and appendix are given, one example for each form: *change your tune* for idiom; the *cold air* is

coming from the window for indirect request, the question ‘*Should I mow the lawn?*’ and the answer ‘*the nephews are taking a nap*’ for semantic - inference implicature and finally the question ‘*Should I open the parasol?*’ and the answer ‘*no, I really like getting sunburned*’ for sarcastic – inference implicature. For each one, there is a literal and non – literal interpretation, defined above. ‘*Change your tune*’, for instance, according to the experiment, literally means *to change the music* and figuratively means *to change the subject you are talking about*. ‘*The cold air is coming from the window*’ literally means *looking at the thermostat* and non – literally means *closing the window*. However, do all the children ascribe same meanings to these forms? Does looking at the thermostat really give the literal meaning for this sentence? Children are directed in this way due to the experiment design. As stated above, asking a comparatively open – ended question like ‘*what would you do now?*’ could yield less directive answers. Also, giving a full list of these non – literal forms instead of the only ones used in the experiment in the appendix section would be better to have a full picture of the sentences used in the experiments. Finally, it is questionable to what extent only these 16 sentences - idioms, implicatures and indirect requests - reflect the general acquisition order in children.

In conclusion, the study attempts to shed light on a subject which poses one of the most challenging tests of comprehension theories. Its results and methodological aspects can be discussed or verified since non – literal or figurative language comprehension studies generally need more empirical evidence. In this article, methodology section might need some modifications in terms of participants’ ages and general experiment design. It is also worth reminding that the study offers its readers a compiled and well – organized non – literal language acquisition literature.

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