

Inferring intentions and emotions of story characters: Age effects in narrative comprehension

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Learning how to tell a story involves the mastery of both ‘landscape of action’ and ‘landscape of consciousness’ (Bruner 1986). This means that children must not only narrate action sequences, but also infer and explain the thoughts, emotions and intentions of story characters: How does this character feel? Why does s/he carry out an action? What’s his/her goal? There is an ongoing debate about the age at which children are able to understand these mental states, and they are often seen in relationship with cognitive development (Theory of Mind, cf. Shapiro & Hudson 1991, Tomasello 2003, Westby 2012). Several studies have pointed out an age discrepancy here: Nicolopoulou & Richner (2007) found that children could conceive of story characters’ mental states around age 4 even though they did not much mention them in their narrations before age 8–9. In a study by Stein & Glenn (1979), children aged 6 understood the goals, thoughts and emotions of main characters well even though they performed poorly when expressing them in a story recall task. Children’s story comprehension needs to be investigated further, particularly for languages other than monolingual English.

A new assessment tool, the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN, Gagarina et al. 2012), opens up new possibilities. It combines production with comprehension and specifically taps the understanding of goals and mental states. As MAIN contains 4 structurally parallel fictional picture sequences (6 pictures each), child performance can be compared across stimuli, and across languages for bilinguals.

Preliminary results indicate that children age 7 do not yet regularly express the intentions and emotions of story characters in narratives elicited by MAIN (Bohnacker, in press).

The present paper is one of the first to report story comprehension results for MAIN. For 124 children, we studied how the understanding of intentions and emotions of protagonists in picture stories develops between age 4–7. 72 monolingual Swedish-speaking children aged 4;0–6;10 and 52 Swedish-English bilinguals aged 4;11–7;9 told two MAIN stories each and subsequently answered 10 comprehension questions.

For each narrative, a story comprehension score based on the responses to all comprehension questions was calculated. Additionally, the responses to individual comprehension questions were analyzed in detail and compared across age groups.

Clear age effects were found for the overall comprehension score, with a similar pattern for monolingual and bilingual children. Most improvement happened between age 5 and 6. Intentions (goals) of story characters were generally understood well, even by the youngest children (age 4). By contrast, children had difficulties in inferring the emotional reactions of a protagonist, even at age 6–7. This, we believe, is not because of ‘badly drawn pictures’ but rather because children rarely took the entire plotline into account. A qualitative analysis revealed that they homed in on the facial and bodily depictions of protagonists in individual pictures and inferred mental states from these. With increasing age, children focused less on such ‘short-range’ mental states and drew more inferences from the story as a whole.

References

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