The acquisition of metonymy

Ingrid Lossius Falkum
(joint work with Marta Recasens and Eve Clark)

Abstract

In metonymy an expression is used to designate something that falls outside its conventional denotation, but with a clear associative relation holding between the conventional and the contextually-determined, metonymic denotation (e.g., 'The ham sandwich left without paying', 'Proust is difficult to read'). While examples of such metonymic use of expressions in the language of adults are prolific, little has been known about the role of metonymy in child language. Are young children sufficiently pragmatically competent to understand metonymy, and to use expressions metonymically in communicating with others? If so, when does this ability emerge in development?

In this study we explore how young children fare with novel metonymic meanings, focusing on both comprehension and production. Data were collected from 47 children (aged 2;9 – 5;9) and 27 adults, all native speakers of English. Children’s ability to understand and reason about metonymic meanings was tested in a new comprehension task, designed to correspond to their level of world knowledge and linguistic competence. Children’s ability to produce metonymies, previously unexplored in the literature, was also tested in two different elicitation tasks. The first investigated children’s ability to use metonymy as referential shorthand, while the second task investigated their willingness to name animate beings metonymically on the basis of a salient property. Our results revealed that, although the children were outperformed by the adults, even three-year-olds are able to both understand and spontaneously produce metonymies under the right circumstances. This was taken to provide support for an early-emerging figurative language ability and a growing pragmatic competence.