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Metalinguistic development in preschool: a longitudinal observation

Conny Gollek, Martin J Doherty, Lynne G. Duncan

Objectives: Children's false belief development has been documented thoroughly, the development of metalinguistic behaviour not receiving similar attention. This longitudinal study explored children's understanding of two metalinguistic tasks throughout preschool years in relation to general language skills and false belief understanding.

Design: Children undertook a series of false belief, metalinguistic and executive function tasks alongside standardised language measures at 4 times over the course of 34 months to observe emerging skills aged 3.5 until age 6.

Methods: The study started with 77 participants, and was continued at time 3 and 4 with 40 and 32 respectively. Children were part of a preschool language study, follow up was only possible with a smaller group.

Results: The association between false belief and metalinguistic tasks got progressively stronger ($p < .05$ at time 1 and $p < .001$ at time 4). General language correlated strongly with false belief ($p < .001$) and metalinguistic ($p < .05$) measures at time 1, weaker at time 2 and not at all after. Language emerged as significant predictor across all times only for future language skills in regression analysis. False belief and metalinguistics skills were predicted at time 4 from time 3 measures. The inclusion of executive function and deprivation data did not add significantly to any model.

Conclusion: There is a strong alignment of false belief, metalinguistic skills and general language skills (vocabulary, grammar) at age 3.5, which progressively weakens. An underlying factor between false belief understanding and the understanding of language from a representational perspective emerges then, as indicated through growing metalinguistic skills.