Do young children show early sensitivity to viewpoint in iconic gestures?

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Introduction

Iconic gestures convey substantive information not found in speech by expressing actions or attributes associated with objects. An earlier study with adult speakers (Beattie & Shovelton, 2002) showed that adult speakers are particularly good at gleaning information from iconic gestures that use a character viewpoint (CVP; e.g., “It goes like this”+flapping arms to convey BIRD FLYING)—gestures that blend the gesturer’s body into the gesture space, compared to ones using observer viewpoint (OVP; e.g., “It goes like this”+peace sign with right hand moving up and down to convey RABBIT HOPPING) that do not blend the gesturer’s body into the gesture space. Here, we ask if iconic gestures with CVP are easier to understand when children are just beginning to produce such iconic gestures.

Methods

To explore this question, we presented 18 children (14 girls, Mage=31.7 months) with uninformative speech accompanied by an iconic gesture using either a CVP or OVP; they were then asked to choose the picture matching the description. Both a CVP and an OVP gesture were created for six objects; children saw all 12 trials in a randomized order. After the comprehension task, children were asked to name each object and produce a gesture for it.

Results

Our preliminary results showed that young children—similar to adults—not only understood, but also produced, a greater number of gestures with CVP than OVP.

Conclusion

These results show that the sensitivity to iconic gesture viewpoint emerges at a very young age.
Key Words:
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