

# Children's pragmatic development

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## What is pragmatics?



When we communicate using language, we not only need to know words (vocabulary) and grammatical constructions (for example, what order to say the words in, or how to express the past tense). We also need to be able to make inferences about the meaning that the person we're talking with wants to convey. This is because we typically convey far more meaning than the literal meaning of what we say – or it may be a different meaning altogether!

Think about when someone is sarcastic or ironic: they say one thing, but can mean the complete opposite! These kind of inferences need us to take into account all sorts of different aspects of a situation – what the speaker does or doesn't know, the background knowledge we share, what we've already said in the conversation, and so on.

One influential theory about how we do this was proposed by British philosopher Paul Grice: when we communicate, we expect that we and our interlocutors will be co-operative, by saying what is informative and relevant for the situation. Here are a couple of examples, of a type of inference known as an 'implicature':

Bob: What did you take from the fridge?  
Fred: I took a strawberry.



Annie: Where do you want play with your new toy?  
Lucy: I'll get my coat.

In the first, Bob can infer that Fred took only an apple, because if he took anything else, he would have said so to be *informative*; in the second, Annie can infer that Lucy wants to play outside, because this makes her answer about her coat *relevant* for the situation.

## Want to find out more?

More about me and my research: [www.elspethwilson.uk](http://www.elspethwilson.uk)

More about growing up with more than one language: [sites.google.com/site/cambiling](http://sites.google.com/site/cambiling)

More about language development online: [lucid.ac.uk](http://lucid.ac.uk)

More about implicatures online: [www.icge.co.uk/languagesciencesblog/?p=350](http://www.icge.co.uk/languagesciencesblog/?p=350)

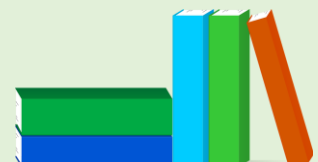
A long read on meaning in language: Stephen Pinker *The Stuff of Thought* (2007)

Long reads on language development:

Michael Tomasello *Constructing A Language* (2003)

Thom Scott-Phillips *Speaking our minds* (2014)

Roberta Golinkoff & Kathy Hirsh-Pasek *How babies talk* (2000)



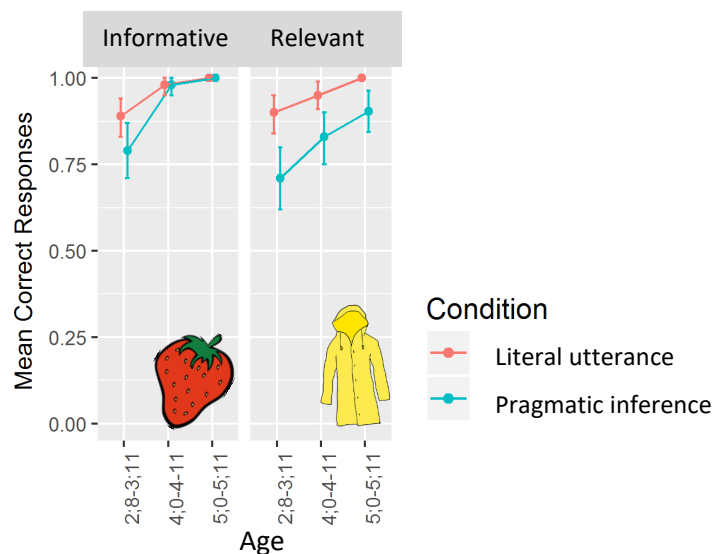
## What did I find out?

I investigated some aspects of how young children learn to make these kinds of inferences.

- Even 3-year-olds can make these kind of inferences when the situation makes the inference straightforward. They get better at making such simple inferences until age 5, when they are becoming like adults in their comprehension.
- Some inference types may be easier than others: for instance, the example with the apple, relying on informativeness, may be easier for young children than the example with the coat, relying on relevance.
- When children have to take into account different aspects of the situation in order to infer what the speaker means, they can struggle more: when they have to take into account what the speaker can or cannot see (and therefore does or does not know about), they struggle to make inferences like adults even aged 6.
- Children's knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is one of the main factors associated with their pragmatic inferencing skills; there was no evidence for an association with how many languages children are exposed to (monolinguals vs multilinguals).

## How did I find it out?

The studies involved activities that felt like games, in which children heard sentences or short dialogues, and had to choose the picture that went with what the speaker said. From the child's point of view, there were no right or wrong answers, but the pictures they chose revealed how they had understood what the speaker said – and specifically, whether they had made a pragmatic inference or not.



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