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### **Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society**

#### **Title**

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#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/12b6c6n9>

#### **Journal**

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 27(27)

#### **ISSN**

1069-7977

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#### **Publication Date**

2005

Peer reviewed

# Lexicalization and Conceptualization of Emotional Expressions in School-aged Children.

## The Effect of Contextual Cues

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### Introduction

The accuracy in face processing increases with age and differs as a function of different emotion domains: primary emotions are more easily and early recognized and understood if compared with more complex social emotions (Widen & Russell, 2003, 2004). The present studies aim to investigate the ability to recognize and understand emotional expressions in school-aged children, focusing on the development of conceptual and lexical skills. As regard to *lexical skills*, they improves with age. Emotional labels represent the final step of a developmental process which includes firstly a dimensional definition based on *hedonic value*, then a representation related to situational context (*script*) and finally the a specific abstract verbal label. With regard to *conceptualisation abilities*, the representation of the emotional context (particularly causal connections and behavioural consequences), has a remarkable significance: it constitutes the explicative element of the emotional experience. Child recognizes an emotion by verifying the presence of the prototypical elements included in the *emotional script*. As suggested by the emotions dimensional model (Russell & Fernández-Dolls, 1997) hedonic value and arousal are central features of this representation. It could be hypotized that emotional script represents a facilitating contextual element, which make easier to identify emotions and contribute to elicit more complex and articulated decoding processes. To verify this hypothesis, we compare decoding abilities using two different types of stimuli: emotional scripts and facial stimuli.

### Method

*Participants:* 26 children (11 six-year-olds and 14 eleven-year-olds).

*Materials:* Study 1: *Emotional scripts:* pictures illustrating situations eliciting the emotional correlates of happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust.; Study 2: *Facial stimuli* (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust) by Ekman & Friesen database (1976).

*Procedure:* half-structured interview grid by Widen & Russell (2004); response scoring with reference to the

following conceptual categories: a) *correctness* of verbal labels; b) *eliciting causes* and *consequent effects* as well as *hedonic value* and *arousal*.

### Results and Discussion

Log-linear analysis confirms that contextual script, if compared with simple facial stimulus, has a discriminant effect, eliciting a more adequate conceptual and lexical representation. The emotional features of hedonic valence (Balconi, 2004) and causal effect (Widen & Russell, 2004) are found to be prototypical attributes in the conceptualisation of emotions. Finally, emotional representations between subjects differ as a function of age and emotional domain: primary emotions are more easily recognized and more completely conceptualized; nonetheless, if both 11-year-olds and 6-year-olds show adequate competences to define and comprehend emotional universe, only the older children reveal consistent decoding skills even for complex emotions (Carrera, Mazzucchelli, Balconi & Cerri, 2004).

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