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Do children extend pragmatic principles to non-linguistic communication?

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Abstract

In conversation, speakers are expected to offer as much information as required by the purposes of the exchange. (Grice, 1975). Classic theories of communication assume that the principle of informativeness extends beyond linguistic interactions (Grice, 1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1986), but relevant evidence so far is limited. We replicated the paradigm of a referent selection study in which preschool-aged children successfully apply the principle of informativeness to linguistic exchanges (Stiller et al., 2015) and added a matched non-linguistic condition in which the referent choice was communicated through pictures instead of verbal descriptions. Children between the ages of 3.5 to 5 performed significantly better in both the linguistic and non-linguistic conditions compared to a control condition, and there were no significant differences between linguistic and non-linguistic conditions for 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds, or 5-year-olds. We conclude that preschool-aged children apply pragmatic principles to pictures as well as words.