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Preschoolers Evaluate Information about Word Meaning

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Abstract

We used a between-subjects selective trust paradigm to investigate whether 3-year-olds ($N=28$) and 5-year-olds ($N=28$) evaluate the quality of informants definitions for familiar and unfamiliar words. 3-year-olds did not choose the informative definer (silly=goofy) over the circular definer (silly=silly) for familiar or unfamiliar words. In contrast, 5-year-olds endorsed the informative definer for familiar ($M=.71$, $t(12)=2.38$, $p=.04$) and unfamiliar ($M=.82$, $t(14)=3.41$, $p=.004$) words. Additionally, 5-year-olds in the unfamiliar word condition chose to learn new information from the informative definer, such as asking about novel words ($p=.001$) and novel object functions ($p=.001$). The unfamiliar word condition may have elicited better performance than the familiar word condition because the contrast between the two informants was more obvious. We are currently investigating whether 3- and 5-year-olds prefer an informant who uses familiar words to define novel words (meager=small) to one that uses other novel words (meager=paltry).