

Comprehension of figurative language: An experimental study

While there are numerous studies on the relationship between literal and figurative language in English (Chiappe & Kennedy, 2001; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001), acquisition studies on the relationship between literal and figurative language in Cantonese are scarce. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how typically developing Cantonese-speaking children comprehend sentences of the form [subject + adjective/verb + *dou* + noun phrase/adjectival phrase + (*gam*)], which can be used to express both literal claims (e.g., *Keoi haang dou hou gui*. 'He walked so much that he was very tired.') and figurative ones (e.g., *Keoi fei dou zek zyu gam*. 'He is so fat that he is like a pig.'). Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: (i) Based on a test involving sentences of the above form, at what age do typically developing Cantonese-speaking children show competence in comprehending figurative language? (ii) To what extent do our findings support Chiappe & Kennedy's (2001) literal base theory of figurative language, which holds that figurative claims are modeled on literal forms of expression, with the constraints on the surface features of the literal forms relaxed? (iii) What is the role of similarity, familiarity and salience of features in children's comprehension of figurative language? (iv) In what ways are Cantonese-speaking children with autism similar to and different from typically developing children in terms of comprehension of figurative language?

In our experiment, a total of 40 typically developing Cantonese-speaking children from 3;09 to 5;09 years old from two local kindergartens were recruited. They were administered a comprehension test composed of 56 pictures and 56 sentences of the above form, and they were asked to judge whether the content of each sentence matched that of the scenario depicted by the corresponding picture. While the 56 sentences could be understood literally, the preferred readings were the figurative ones.

Our findings showed an early onset of comprehension of figurative language. Specifically, our findings showed that typically developing Cantonese-speaking children as young as 4;06 were able to comprehend figurative language. Our findings suggest that there was a strong correlation between comprehension of literal language and comprehension of figurative language, which lends support to Chiappe & Kennedy's (2001) literal base theory of figurative language. Our findings further revealed that similarity and salience of features play a more critical role than familiarity in children's comprehension of figurative language.

Given previous studies which show that children with autism have a strong tendency to interpret simile literally (Happé, 1995), we expect that

Cantonese-speaking children with autism will perform less well than the typically developing children. More specifically, unlike typically developing children, children with autism will show a strong tendency to interpret the 56 sentences as having their literal readings even when those readings are pragmatically odd.