

Look at THAT: Deixis reveals developmental changes in verbal prediction

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Abstract

The present study evaluated whether listeners can use spatial deixis (e.g., this, that, these, and those) to predict the plurality and proximity of speakers' referents. In an eye-tracking task, adults and 5-year-old children viewed scenes while listening to deictic sentences (e.g., Look at that beautiful baby) and neutral sentences (e.g., Look at the beautiful baby). We found that both adults and children used deixis to predict the plurality of the referent (e.g., using this to anticipate a singular referent). However, only adults used deixis to predict the proximity of the referent to the speaker (e.g., using this to anticipate referents that were proximal to the speaker, and that to identify distal referents). Thus, the present findings reveal specific developmental changes in prediction during language processing. We argue that, beyond determining whether listeners predict, determining how listeners predict is crucial to understand prediction's role in language processing and learning.