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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/7rw6m6gr>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 45(45)

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Publication Date

2023

Peer reviewed

Losing the thread: How 3- and 5-year-olds predict the outcome of a story when non-literal language is used to update events.

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Abstract

How do young children make sense of idioms in everyday contexts? A picture selection task was used to test differences in 3- and 5-year-old's prediction strategies when an idiom is used to update story events. Norwegian-speaking children (N=162) were asked to predict story outcomes from a display of options based on cognitive heuristics. The results show that 5-year-olds are significantly more likely than 3-year-olds to choose literal interpretations of idioms as story outcomes ($\delta = 0.12$). Neither group are more likely to select the correct idiomatic interpretation. Furthermore, 5-year-olds choose the correct outcome significantly more when there is no literal option available onscreen ($\delta = 0.15$). Age-related differences may be due to developments in metalinguistic reflexivity.