Could both be right? Children and adult’s sensitivity to subjectivity in language

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Background
- Word meanings may be subjective, posing a challenge for semantic compositionality
- Subjective words permit faultless disagreement

How does the adult intuition that subjective disagreements are faultless develop?
Faultless disagreement could arise when:
- Speakers have different personal tastes
- A predicate is inherently vague
- Speakers have had different experiences, thus different standards

Do adults and children consider a speaker’s opinion and experience when interpreting different adjectives?
- 4-year-olds understand that words like tall are interpreted relative to specific distributions
- Young children may be naive realists
- Linguistic subjectivity may be especially difficult, due to children’s fundamental assumptions about language

Method, cont.

Test Questions
Following each assertion:
CRITICAL QUESTION: Zoe said, “That’s a tall pimwit,” was she wrong, or could she be right?
UTTERANCE EXPLANATION: Why?

Following each assertion:
DISAGREEMENT EXPLANATION: Why did Zoe and Big Bird not agree?
For each object, in a post-test:
PERSONAL PERCEPTION: Is this pinwit tall?

Experiment 1: Adults
Are faultless disagreement judgments modulated by speakers’ experience?
- Characters exposed to distinct or identical distributions
Participants: 59 adults (Distinct: 25 adults, 15 women, M = 21 yrs, SD = 1.7 yrs, 16;5 - 19;9 yrs, SD = 1.7 yrs) Identical: 45 adults, 26 women, M = 20.9 yrs, SD = 3.5 yrs)

Experiment 2: Children
Do children permit faultless disagreement for subjective adjectives, and relative adjectives when characters have been exposed to distinct distributions?
Participants: 71 children, 4.0 - 9.6 yrs
- 5.6 - 7.0 yrs, n = 24 (15 girls)
- 8.0 - 9.6 yrs, n = 24 (14 girls)
- Children ‘sided’ with character who accorded with their own perceptions
- Rates of faultless disagreement judgments did not differ for absolute and subjective adjectives in younger age groups

Experiment 3: Older Children
Participants: 24 children, 8.0 - 9.6 (12 girls)
- Older children permitted faultless disagreement for relative, subjective adj., when speakers exposed to different distributions,
- Still significantly below adult and training-baseline rates

Stimuli & Method

Puppets are independently exposed to distinct (see above) or identical distributions of novel objects, varying along two dimensions (e.g., height and spottedness), then disagree about a novel, intermediate object.

Faultless disagreement not permitted

Faultless disagreement?

Relaxed

Subjective

Relative

Absolute

Stimuli & Method

Method, cont.

Faultless Disagreement by Trial & Condition

Faultless Disagreement by Adj. & Age

Do children understand that different information sources are relevant for different adjectives?
- Children’s early explanations refer largely to object properties
- With age, children become more likely to refer to...
- speaker experience for relative adjectives
- speaker opinion for subjective adjectives
- Oldest age group still significantly below adult levels of reference to information sources beyond properties of the object.

Conclusions

- Adults permit faultless disagreement for many reasons; distribution exposure, inherent uncertainty, and speaker opinion
- Less faultless disagreement for relative adjective assertions with more consensus (i.e., more for big than tall)
- Prolonged developmental trajectory of faultless disagreement judgments, consistent with interpretive ToM literature

Future Directions

- Continuity between children and adults?
- How do children come to master linguistic subjectivity?
- More sensitive methods (e.g., informant paradigms where speakers “incorrectly” use absolute vs. relative/subjective adjectives)
- How does children’s understanding of linguistic subjectivity relate to their metalinguistic & epistemological development?

References