Sensing subjectivity: Semantic and epistemological development
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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 differently when characters have been exposed to distinct or identical distributions

Stimuli & Method
Puppets are independently exposed to distinct (see above) or identical distributions of novel objects, varying along two dimensions (e.g., height and presence).

Method, cont.
Faultless disagreement responses differentially related to post-test judgments by adj. condition x adjective type interaction:
- FD rates decrease in identical condition for absolute & relative, but not subjective, adj.

Experiment 1: Adults
Are faultless disagreement judgments modulated by speakers’ experience?
- Characters exposed to distinct or identical distributions

- Participants: 59 adults (DISTINCT: 25 adults, 18 women, M = 21 yrs, SD = 1.7 yrs.
- IDENTICAL: 34 adults, 26 women, M = 20.9 yrs, SD = 3.5 yrs)

- Utterance explanations
- Adults refer to:
  - object properties more for abs.
  - distribution exposure more for relative adjectives
  - speaker opinion more for subj.

Faultless Disagreement by Trial & Condition

Results, cont.

How and when do children become adult-like?
- Adults permit faultless disagreement for many reasons: distribution exposure, inherent uncertainty, and speaker opinion
- Children adult-like in faultless disagreement judgments only by approx. 9 years, consistent with interpretive ToM literature
- May explain advantage of relative over subjective adjs.
- Children’s sensitivity to sources of subjectivity is developing through the early school years

Future Directions
- Can children and adults use consensus information to infer the subjectivity of a novel adjective?
- Is a speaker’s competence evaluated differently for ‘incorrect uses’ of absolute vs. relative/subjective adjectives?
- How do children’s understanding of linguistic subjectivity relate to their epistemological development?

References
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