

Children's informativeness in event descriptions
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Adults adjust the informativeness of their utterances to the needs of their addressee.^{1,4} For children, relevant evidence is mixed. Five- to 8-year-olds often produce ambiguous utterances in their referential communication with ignorant interlocutors,^{2,3} but other studies suggest that young children are sensitive to their partners' perspective.⁵⁻⁷ The factors contributing to this mixed pattern remain unclear.

Here we explore the communicative circumstances under which children offer informative descriptions matching their listener's needs. Unlike prior work on nominal reference, we ask whether children can provide information to disambiguate *event* reference. We probe effects of (a) typicality of disambiguating event components (typical vs. atypical instruments), and (b) the listener's visual access.

In Experiment 1, participants described events to listeners who either saw or could not see the events. Half of the events contained typical and half atypical instruments (e.g., watering plants with watering can/hat). We found that both adults and 5-year-olds were more likely to mention atypical than typical instruments (ad:M=.87 vs. .22; ch:M=.36 vs. 06, $ps<.05$). We also found that adults were more likely to mention instruments when the events were not visible to their interlocutor ($M_{\text{NoVisualAccess}}=.64$, $M_{\text{VisualAccess}}=.47$; $p<.05$) but in children visual access did not affect instrument mention ($M_{\text{NoVisualAccess}}=.20$, $M_{\text{VisualAccess}}=.23$; $p>.05$).

Experiment 2 asked 4-year-olds, 5-year-olds and adults to select one event from a minimal pair of pictured typical/atypical instrument events and describe it to a listener with or without visual access to the pair. Results showed that, in this contrastive context, adults were highly informative overall but children massively failed to provide disambiguating information. Specifically, 4- and 5-year-olds mentioned atypical instruments more frequently than typical instruments (4s:M=.23 vs. 07; 5s:M=.43 vs. .19; $ps<.001$), but adults used both equally frequently (ad:M=.94 vs. 92; $p>.05$). Overall, 5-year-olds were more informative than 4-year-olds. Visual access to the events did not affect instrument mention in any age group ($p>.05$). To test whether children's low informativeness was due to broad pragmatic limitations or to context-specific difficulties, Experiment 3 was a more interactive version of Experiment 2: participants played a guessing game with a confederate listener who was nevertheless introduced as "naïve". Results showed that, in this interactive context, overall informativeness increased ($p<.001$). Still, speakers tended to mention atypical/unpredictable instruments more frequently than typical instruments ($p=.014$).

In sum, adult speakers performed both generic adjustments (adding information about atypical instruments) and more specific adjustments to addressees' needs (mentioning instruments more often when addressees could not see the events). Children, however, often included very few instruments and made only generic (typicality-based) adjustments. Children's mention of instruments increased only in the more interactive Exp.3, where children engaged in a more genuine collaborative interaction with a "true" interlocutor. We show that the disparate findings in prior referential communication studies can be explained by similar differences in the nature of the referential task and discuss implications for children's pragmatic development.

References

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Figures

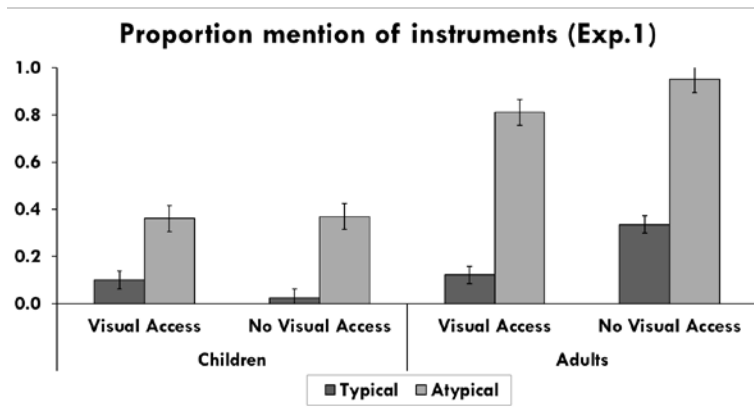


Fig.1. Proportion of mention of Typical and Atypical instruments (Exp.1).

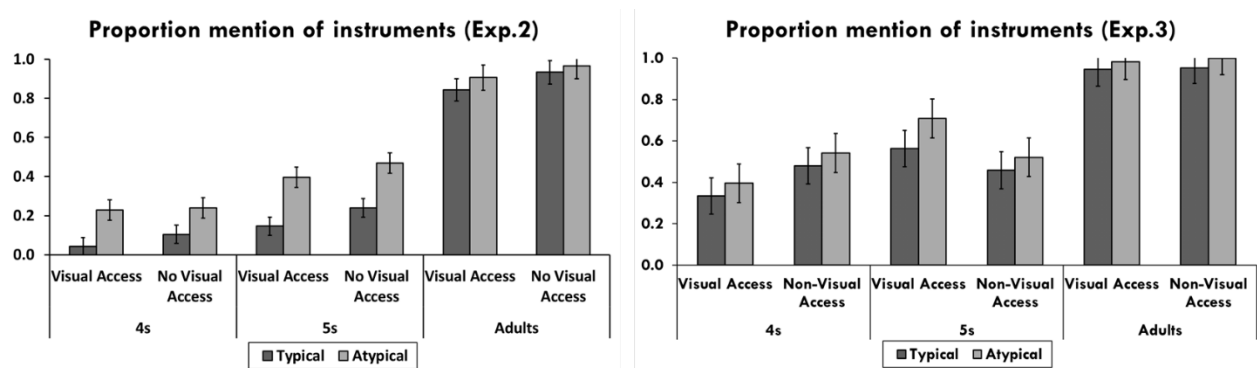


Fig. 2. Proportion of mention of Typical and Atypical instruments (Exp.2-3).