

Caregivers' contributions to children's understanding of abstract words during joint book reading

Katharina J. Rohlfing¹, Franziska Viertel¹, Theresa Kohlmeyer², Oliver Reis²
¹Psycholinguistics, ²Catholic Religious Education/focus on inclusion

In our pilot study, we ask:

- ▶ What are the **caregivers' strategies** to support children's understanding of abstract words?
- ▶ How do the strategies relate to the discourse about the meaning of abstract words?

Introduction

Abstract words occur late in the development and are reported to be difficult to learn, because (a) referents are not directly perceivable and thus (b) more complex way of „contextualization“ is needed for the meaning to become clear (Vigliocco et al. 2018). Emotional associations seems to have a greater role in the acquisition of abstract than concrete words (Kousta et al., 2011). **Little is known about how parents contextualize abstract words for the children to understand.**

Results

Overall, we could identify the following **strategies** that caregiver use to convey the meaning of the word „mercy“ (German: *Barmherzigkeit*) to their children (see Table 1 for more details).

strategy	type	example
perspectivation	mental states (cognitive)	<i>Jona thinks, he won't be seen...</i>
	(volitional)	<i>...he hides, he tries it somehow</i>
	(dispositional)	<i>God is angry with people...</i>
	direct speech	<i>he thoughts, it is far away, God won't find me</i>
	comparisons	<i>he does like me in a hiding game</i>
emotional valence	questions	<i>but why shouldn't he stay on the boat?</i>
	generalizations	<i>...one shouldn't insist on something but maybe could say ok...</i>
	judgments	<i>it was exhausting, he had to go on foot, he did not have a car...</i>
	exaggerations (comparatives, superlatives)	<i>...because they argue all the time....</i>
	lexical choice	<i>being inflamed means that he is angry</i>
	interjections	<i>...wow...</i>
	inference	<i>then he went for this long exhausting trip</i>

Table 1: Different means of perspectivation and emotional valence in speech.

Our studied dyads **varied** in the way how they structured the joint book reading and use of these strategies. Perspectivation that affords personal involvement are emotionally effective. Vice versa, in a case in which the child cannot follow the perspective, emotional words will not help (Engelbrecht, 2018; see example 2).

We found that children demonstrated some form of a meaning construction in situations, in which the caregiver was able to select some relevant semantic aspects and provide them with elements of perspectivation while simultaneously making use of emotional valence. In this sense, direct speech or questions (see example 2) seems to be more effective than generalization that, in turn, is more effective than a judgment.

Following Hoffman (2016), we can confirm that the extent of personal involvement seems fundamental for the understanding of an abstract word.

Method

We studied 9 children at the age of 7 years from different SES background and with different experience in religious discourse. In our pilot we focus on the joint book reading: 6 caregivers and their children visited our lab and were asked to read a **biblical story**.

Semantic aspects of the word *mercy* [Barmherzigkeit] were identified (Engelbrecht, 2018): Misconduct, God's anger, negative consequences, regrets, positive turn, God's mercy resulting in situational change.



Figure 1: The setting during the joint book reading: parents were reading a biblical story to their children.

Joint construction of meaning (examples):

Example 1:

- caregiver *they did not want him to die, so they wanted to rescue him* [perspectivation; mental states]
- child *[nods]*
- caregiver *well, the same is for mercy*
If I give something and don't will bad [perspectivation; comparison; generalization]
- child *[nods weakly]*

Example 2:

- caregiver *and then why didn't God destroy the city why didn't God destroy Nineveh?* [perspectivation; questions]
- child *hm*
- caregiver *hm. What did people do after they heard that God wanted to destroy Ninive?* [perspectivation; questions]
- child *hm*
- caregiver *did they find that great (-) or were they sorry for acting bad* [perspectivation; questions]
- child *they were sorry.*

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