What counts as seeing? Young childrens understanding of perceptual reports

Emory Davis
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, United States

Barbara Landau
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, United States

Abstract

Young children can reason about direct and indirect visual information, but fully mapping this understanding to linguistic forms encoding the two knowledge sources appears to come later in development. In English, perception verbs with small clause complements (I saw something happen) report direct perception of an event, while perception verbs with sentential complements (I saw that something happened) can report inferences about an event. In two experiments, we explore when 4-9-year-old English-speaking children have linked the conceptual distinction between direct perception and inference to different complements expressing this distinction. We find that unlike older children or adults, 4-6-year-olds do not recognize that see with a sentential complement can report visually-based inference, even when syntactic and contextual cues make inference interpretations highly salient. Until around age seven, children are still learning the syntax and semantics of perception verbs like see and how distinct syntactic forms encode different kinds of perceptual experience.