

Preschoolers can form conventional pacts with each other to communicate about novel referents

Veronica Boyce

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Robert Sparks

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Yannick Mofor

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Michael Frank

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Abstract

Learning language requires learning not only the content of language, but also how to use language to communicate. Iterated reference games provide a window into such skills, requiring rich communication as participants converge on mutually understandable names for initially novel referents. Some early experiments are interpreted as evidence that 4-5-year-old children cannot converge to the mutually understandable names needed to communicate in an iterated reference game. Here, we revisit young children's referential communicative abilities using a simpler, child-friendly paradigm. Across 51 pairs of children, we found that 4-5-year-olds successfully established reference with each other. Children were 85% accurate, and they often used descriptions similar to their partner's. These findings suggest that children's capacity to construct effective referring expressions in novel contexts emerges earlier than once thought, consistent with the view that children show early pragmatic competence in supportive contexts.