



Idiom comprehension in French-speaking children and adolescents with Williams' syndrome

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at idiom comprehension by French-speaking people with Williams' syndrome (WS) and metapragmatic knowledge is examined. Idiomatic expressions are a nonliteral form of language where there is a considerable difference between what is said (literal interpretation) and what is meant (idiomatic interpretation). WS is characterized by a relatively preserved formal language, social interest and poor conversational skills. Using this framework, the present study aims to explore the comprehension of idiomatic expressions by 20 participants with WS. Participants performed a story completion task (comprehension task), and a task of metapragmatic knowledge to justify their chosen answers. WS performances were compared to typically developing children with the same verbal mental age. The main results can be summarized as follows: (1) people with WS have difficulties to understand idioms; (2) WS group seems to perform partly as typically developing children for the acquisition of metapragmatic knowledge of linguistic convention: there is a progressive increase in metapragmatic knowledge of linguistic convention as age increased. Our results indicate a delay of acquisition in idiom comprehension in Williams' syndrome.

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This study investigates idiomatic expressions comprehension in context by French-speaking children and adolescents with Williams' syndrome (WS), metapragmatic knowledge is also examined. Our present intention will consist in (1) defining an idiomatic expression and reviewing the literature on typical development and (2) describing the pragmatic abilities of people with WS.

Communication is based on the ability to interpret the speaker's intended meaning. When the speaker uses literal language, the intended meaning matches surface structure but when the speaker uses nonliteral language, the form does not match intended meaning. An idiom is a figurative expression that usually can be interpreted literally but that takes a nonliteral meaning when used in a specific context. For example, the literal interpretation of the French idiom "Change de disque" is "Change the tune". In another context, however, the phrase may be used figuratively to mean "Talk about something else". Studies on idiom comprehension have shown that idiom understanding begins in early childhood and gradually improves throughout the school-age years, adolescence, and well into adulthood. These studies have shown that idioms are easier to understand when they occur in linguistically supportive contexts compared to nonsupportive or absent contexts (Ackerman, 1982; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Laval, 2003; Levorato & Cacciari, 1995; Nippold & Martin, 1989). Context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic

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information from which the listener can extract or infer the appropriate sense of the expression. These studies have also shown that individual idioms vary widely in difficulty, with the more familiar and transparent expressions being easier to understand than those that are less familiar and more opaque (Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Levorato, 1993; Levorato & Cacciari, 1992, 1995; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Nippold & Taylor, 1995, 2002; Nippold, Taylor, & Baker, 1996). Familiarity is a measure of how frequently an expression occurs in the language (Nippold & Taylor, 1995, 2002). Transparency is a measure of the degree to which the literal and the nonliteral meanings of an idiom compare. When the literal and nonliteral meanings compare closely, idioms are regarded as transparent, but when the meanings are unrelated, idioms are regarded as opaque.

At the present time, there has been some research exploring the interpretation of nonliteral language in people with developmental disorders (Huber-Okrainec, Blaser, & Dennis, 2005; Kerbel & Grunwell, 1998a, 1998b; Norbury, 2004; Notbohm, 2005; Qualls, Lantz, Pietrzyk, Blood, & Hammer, 2004). In this study, we focus on Williams' syndrome, a rare genetic disorder (1 out of every 20,000 births) caused by the loss of about 28 genes (Palmer et al., 2007; Smoot, Zhang, Klaiman, Schultz, & Pober, 2005). These persons have a unique neuropsychological profile characterized by an apparent dissociation between cognition and language. They have an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) that usually falls between 40 and 70, and language seems to be relatively well-preserved while some cognitive domains are more impaired (Farran & Wilmut, 2007; Karmiloff-Smith et al., 2004; Landau, Hoffman, & Kurz, 2006; Montfoort, Frens, Hooge, Lagers-van Haselen, & van der Geest, 2007; O'Hearn & Landau, 2007). Another characteristic of WS people is their hypersociability (Porter, Coltheart, & Langdon, 2007), especially their ease of interaction with unfamiliar persons (Doyle, Bellugi, Korenberg, & Graham, 2003; Frigerio et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2000). People with WS are mentally retarded but studies on structural aspects of WS language highlight a good level in semantics (Burani, Bimonte, Barca, & Vicari, 2006; Grant, Valian, & Karmiloff-Smith, 2002; Stojanovik, Perkins, & Howard, 2004). Research on sociability in English- and Italian-speaking WSs points to a nonhomogeneous profile (Doyle et al., 2003; Gagliardi et al., 2003; Lacroix, Guidetti, Rogé, & Reilly, 2009; Mervis et al., 2003; Porter et al., 2007; Tager-Flusberg, Plesa-Skwerer, Faja, & Joseph, 2003). Nevertheless, recent studies have shown pragmatic deficits in people with WS such as a low social involvement with others, superficial social relationships (Laws & Bishop, 2003; Gagliardi et al., 2003; Johnson & Carey, 1998), an inappropriate initiation of interactions and stereotyped conversations (Laws & Bishop, 2004), relatively poor conversational skills (Lacroix, Bernicot, & Reilly, 2007; Stojanovik, 2006; Stojanovik, Perkins, & Howard, 2001).

For WS, because of their relatively good skills in language, their social interest, and their pragmatic deficits, some studies investigate the nonliteral language comprehension. We can mention a few studies on WS and nonliteral language. Karmiloff-Smith, Klima, Bellugi, Grant, and Baron-Cohen (1995) used a task designed by Happé (1993) to test the ability of people with WS to understand metaphor and sarcasm. One task consisted in five sentences to complete by choosing the appropriate word in a list of target words. The other task consisted in the reading of five stories and the participant was asked what the story characters meant by the ironic or metaphorical utterance with forced-choice questions. The results were unclear because half of the participants with WS succeeded on the metaphor and the sarcasm statements. Sullivan, Winner, and Tager-Flusberg (2003) tested the ability of 16 adolescents with WS to distinguish lies and jokes. The difference between the lie and the joke is the child's second-order belief about the adult's knowledge of the truth. The WSs performances were compared to a group of 11 adolescents with Prader-Willi syndrome and to a group of 12 adolescents with Nonspecific Mental Retardation. Four stories were presented; they described situations in which an adult knows that a child has not completed a required chore. In two stories, the false statements were lies and in the two others, the false statements were jokes. The results indicated some difficulties for adolescents with WS to distinguish lies from jokes. The authors emphasized the fact that the ability to distinguish lies from jokes depends in part on the ability to attribute second-order knowledge. This research indicates the difficulty for adolescents with WS to understand the connection between mental states and nonliteral language. More recently, Annaz et al. (2008) focused on metaphor and metonymy. Ten children with WS were compared to typically developing children. Ten lexicalized metaphors (e.g. "There is a flood outside the museum.") and ten lexicalized metonyms (e.g. "I found Robbie Williams in the lounge.") were presented into simple picture-stories. The child has to answer an open-ended question about what the expression referred to. Results indicated that performance of children with WS was poorer than the typically developing group. The study highlights some cognitive processes specific to metaphor and metonymy. More precisely, the authors argued that metaphor comprehension is an ability that involves cognition and language, while metonymy falls more squarely within the language domain. In Williams' syndrome, it seems that these two figurative language constructions engage separate mechanisms.

Nevertheless, research shows that context is important in idiom comprehension and not only good formal language skills in children and adolescents. For this reason, it seems essential to look at idiom comprehension by French-speaking people with WS (where language is often described as preserved on linguistic aspects). Our study is original because for the first time, idiomatic expressions are investigated in Williams' syndrome. We addressed two questions: (1) Is the ability of children and adolescents with WS to understand idioms comparable to that of TD children of the same verbal mental age? (2) Do children and adolescents with WS have any metapragmatic knowledge of idiomatic expressions?

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Nineteen native French-speaking participants with WS aged from 7 years 4 months to 17 years 4 months (mean age = 12 years 2 months) participated in the experiment. Verbal Intellectual Quotient is evaluated with Weschler Scales. The mean

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