

FROM PRODUCTION TO SELECTION OF INTERPRETATIONS FOR NOVEL CONCEPTUAL COMBINATIONS: A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

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Abstract: This study looks at how combinations of two French nouns are interpreted. The order of occurrence of the constituents of two types of conceptual combinations, relation and property, was manipulated in view of determining how property-based and relation-based interpretations evolve with age. Three groups of French-speaking children (ages 6, 8, and 10) and a group of adults performed an interpretation-selection task. The results for the children indicated that while property-based interpretations increased with age, relation-based interpretations were in the majority for both combination types, whereas for the adults, relation-based interpretations were in the minority for property combinations. For the children and adults alike, the most frequent interpretations were ones in which the head noun came first and was followed by the modifier (the opposite of the order observed for English).

Keywords: conceptual combination, relation, property, interpretation, development

1. Introduction

A large part of human cognition involves combining concepts of variable familiarity in order to build new concepts (Murphy 2002; Le Ny 2005). Within the past few years, research in English has studied this concept-combining process by looking at pairs of nouns (N1 N2) in which the first noun acts as the modifier of the second (Costello–Keane 2000; 2001; Estes–Glucksberg 1999; 2000; Gagné–Shoben 1997; Hampton 1987; Medin–Shoben 1988; Murphy 1988; 1990; 2002; Wisniewski 1997; Wisniewski–Middleton 2002). In French, new noun–noun combinations