CHILDREN MIX DIRECT AND INDIRECT SPEECH
EVIDENCE FROM THE COMPREHENSION OF PRONOUNS

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Introduction: It is traditionally assumed that there are two fundamentally different ways to report the speech of someone else: direct speech (1), where the actual speaker purports to present someone’s words verbatim, and indirect speech (2), where she paraphrases them from her own perspective.

(1) Peter said, “I am happy”.
(2) Peter said that I am happy.

Semantically, the main distinguishing characteristic between direct and indirect speech is the interpretation of indexicals (like I, now, here). For instance, the personal pronoun I refers to the actual speaker in indirect speech (2), but to the reported speaker Peter in direct speech (1). This difference in meaning is caused by a perspective shift in direct speech from the actual speaker’s perspective (in the matrix clause) to the reported speaker’s perspective (in the quote).

However, this clear-cut distinction between direct and indirect speech is challenged by speech reports that do not neatly fall into one category or other. For instance, in Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia, one can say, literally, John said that I am a hero, meaning that John said that he himself is a hero (Schlenker, 2003). In languages with a clear direct-indirect distinction, children seem to start with a more flexible way of speech reporting where they mix features of direct and indirect speech comparable to the Amharic example (Goodell & Sachs, 1992; Hickmann, 1993; Nordqvist, 2001).

So far direct-indirect mixings have only been studied in children’s production of speech reports. In this paper, we investigate at what age children are able to distinguish direct and indirect speech in comprehension. We focus on the interpretation of personal pronouns because the majority of direct-indirect mixings that children produce are related to pronouns (Goodell & Sachs, 1992).

Method: 136 children between 4;1 and 12;8 years of age and 33 adults, all monolingual Dutch speakers, participated in the experiment. In Dutch, direct speech (example (3)) and indirect speech (example (4)) can be distinguished by syntactic (verb-second vs. verb-final word order) and lexical features (dat-complementizer in indirect speech). In addition in our experiment the direct speech sentences have a pause of 800ms between reporting clause and quotation and include a slight change of pitch in the quotation (see Jansen, Gregory, & Brenier, 2001).

(3) Direct speech: Aap zei “Ik krijg de voetbal”.
'Monkey said, “I get the football”.'

(4) Indirect speech: Aap zei dat hij de voetbal krijgt.
'Monkey said that he gets the football.'

The experiment is designed as a tablet game. The participants see 30 scenes with three animated animals as protagonists. In each scene, one animal whispers – incomprehensibly for the experimental participants – into another animal’s ear which of the three animals gets a certain object (e.g. a football) (Fig. 1a). The original addressee tells the information then to the third animal using either direct speech or indirect speech (Fig. 1b). Each direct and indirect speech sentence includes one of three pronouns ik (‘I’), jij (‘you’) or hij (‘he’). The task of the participants is to select the recipient of the object, who is also the referent of the pronoun (Fig. 1c). The participants’ choices and reaction times are recorded.
**Figure 1.** Test materials

1a. Incomprehensible whispering (reported speech context)

1b. Uttering of speech report, e.g. *Elephant said “I get the football.”* (actual speech context)

1c. Selection phase

**Figure 2.** Percentage of correct pronoun interpretation per age group in direct speech

![Graph showing percentage accuracy of correct pronoun interpretation per age group in direct speech.](image)

**Figure 3.** Percentage of correct pronoun interpretation per age group in indirect speech

![Graph showing percentage accuracy of correct pronoun interpretation per age group in indirect speech.](image)
Results and Discussion: All age groups make significantly more mistakes in the interpretation of pronouns in direct speech (Fig. 2) than in indirect speech (Fig. 3). Increasing age has a positive effect on accuracy in direct speech, but even 11-year-old children are hardly above chance level. An analysis of the mistakes in direct speech reveals that in 99 percent of the cases, children interpret pronouns in direct speech like in indirect speech, i.e. they evaluate pronouns relative to the actual instead of the reported speech context. I argue that this is due to the fact that children are more liable to aspects of the speech situation than adults. Since the actual speech context where the reporting takes place is very salient, children choose it as context of evaluation notwithstanding the cues (like verb-second word order, break before report, change of pitch) that indicate a perspective shift. I point out parallels between my experimental results and languages like Kwaza where the salience of speech act participants can override the need to shift perspective in direct speech (Evans, 2013).

References


