

The Bidirectional Relationship between Theory of Mind and Language in Children

Szabolcs Kiss

University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary

Abstract

This presentation is a state-of-the-art literature review on the bidirectional relationship between theory of mind (ToM) and language in children. ToM refers to the attribution of different mental states to the self and other people in order to interpret, explain and predict behaviour. First, we discuss the grasping of different mental states in infancy and toddlerhood, including the understanding of false belief. Here, we will examine the acquisition of understanding of the most important mental states one by one. We identify a few explanations for the gap between grasping false belief in infancy and passing the traditional verbal false-belief task at the age of four or five. Next, we enumerate different versions of modularism. Then we discuss the relationship between ToM and language acquisition. The present literature shows that we can speak about the two sides of the same coin here. In other words, the relationship between ToM and language is bidirectional. First, we will present those approaches according to which ToM abilities are prerequisites for the acquisition of language. This is one side of the coin. We discuss that certain ToM abilities, such as understanding agency, goals, seeing, intention, emotion, attention, pretence and false belief, occur earlier than the emergence of language, so we argue for the cognition first hypothesis. As mentioned, the mindreading prerequisites for language are only one side of the coin. The other is the different linguistic preconditions for ToM. In this part of the presentation we enumerate different linguistic prerequisites for mindreading such as intentional state language, complement-taking syntax, narratives, maternal mental state language, the contextual view of word meaning, pragmatics etc. We present the various social-constructivist views on the formative role of language in ToM. Here we find a broad spectrum of opinions regarding the role of language in the formation of ToM. On one end of the spectrum is the view according to which language *creates* mental states. On the opposite end it is stated that words are just linguistic *labels* for previously existing concepts. In the middle is the view that language as a mental representational medium can support ToM reasoning.