

# What's difficult about having conversations and telling stories?

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# Overview

- What do children need to know to construct narratives and tell stories?
  1. An understanding of what **information is shared** with others
  2. A grasp of how **choice of linguistic form** conveys different amounts of information
  3. Knowledge of how to produce **complex sentences**
  4. Flexibility to **shift perspectives**

# 1. Sharing common ground

*Can you give **it** to me?*

*What's **it**????!*

To understand what someone is referring to there has to be  
**common ground**

From about 9 months on, babies are quite good at knowing what is shared knowledge

# Reference disambiguation

15- month old children

## What is shared with whom?

The child and the experimenter searched for telephone together.

(The experimenter)



Can you give it to me?



(A new adult)



Can you give it to me?



# Understanding what's new for you

12- and 18- Month-Olds

Child and experimenter play with two toys




Experimenter goes out

Child plays with new toy



Experimenter comes back in



*old* 

*new* 

*old* 

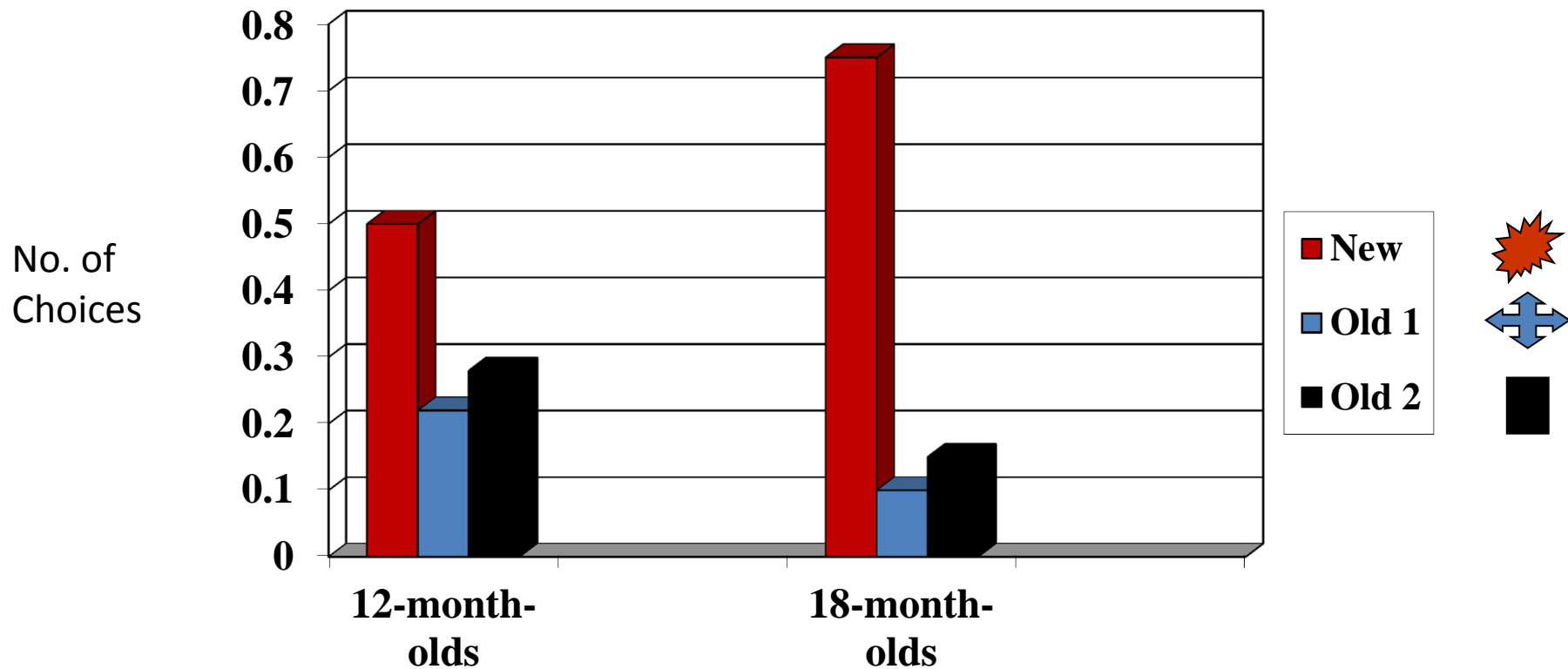
“Wow! Cool!  
Can you give it  
to me!”



Which toy does the baby give her?

Tomasello & Haberl (2003)

# Results



So 18-month-olds know what they have shared and decide that she must be talking about the new object

# What about as they start to talk?

- At the one-word stage, children produce the word that conveys the most essential information for intended message.
- They leave out shared information and comment on what is new or changing.

But as their language develops they learn to establish common ground in their conversation

## 2. Putting common ground into language

Setting up common ground:

*You know that toy we were playing with?*

*It .....*

*I saw Johnny yesterday,*

*He .....*

But:

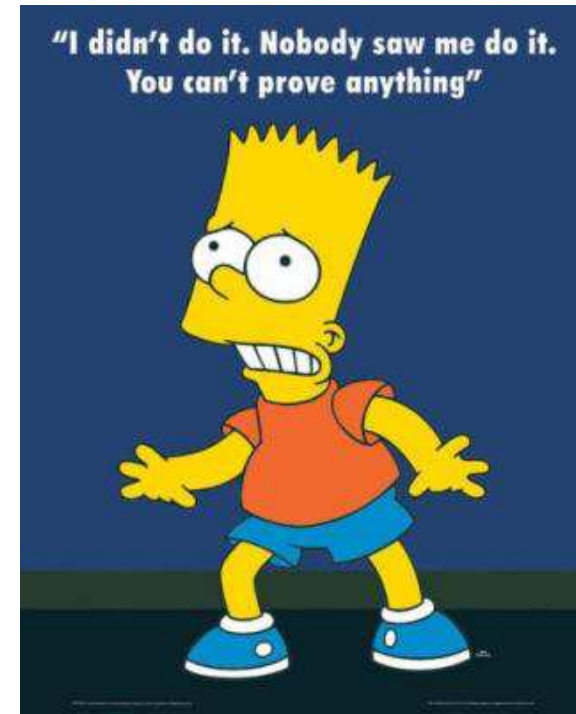
***He*** took my pencil

Who's ***he***?



# I know what you know!

- Choosing what to say based on shared information



OK if the referent is still present because you can point but difficult to know what is being referred to if not

# Referring to things and people appropriately

Understanding how to communicate effectively and conventionally, requires an understanding of:

- What your hearer knows
- How to encode that information through language

# Task facing the child

- Choose an expression that a cooperative listener could reasonably be expected to understand in the current context.
- This means knowing what is **common ground** between you and the listener – making what you are talking about **accessible**

# You can refer to things in many different ways

Which way you choose depends on what knowledge you both share and how easy it is for the person you are talking to, to know who or what you are referring to

## Options for more or less accessible referents:

- Null referent (*Ø jumping*)
- Pronominal referent (*He's jumping*)
- Demonstrative (*This one's jumping*)
- Noun Phrase (*The boy's jumping*)

# Discourse availability –what has been said before

- This is Mrs Peabody, the nursery manager. She runs the nursery with Mrs Smith.
- At the nursery there are ten children. They play in a big playground with a fence around it. One of the children has a pink dress. She is very pretty.
- Mrs Peabody sees Ben in the playground. What are you doing on the floor?" she calls.

# Conversations: Short break-out session

Think up some examples of:

(1) Difficulties in understanding what children are trying to tell you

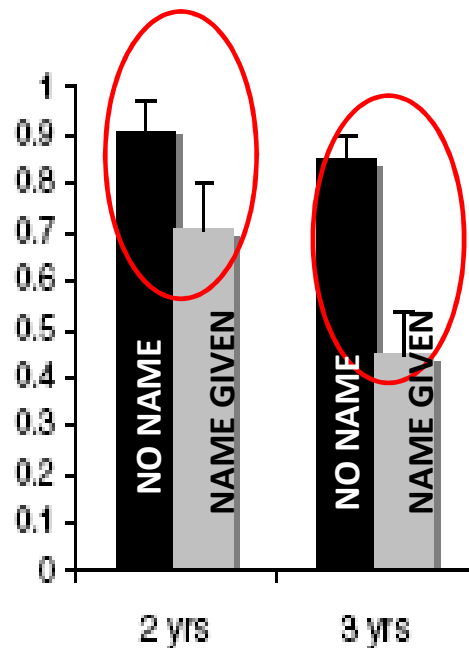
(2) Breakdowns in conversations with children or between them

# Are children sensitive to what has been said before?



- Child watches video with Adult 1.
- Adult 2 on other side of room.
- Adult 1 whispers name of character involved in action
- Two conditions:
  - Adult 2 overhears ***“Was that the clown? What happened?”***
  - Adult 2 doesn’t overhear ***“That sounds like fun, what happened?”***

# How often do children name the character?



% 'THE CLOWN' responses

- **2-year-olds** and **3-year-olds** use more naming responses (*The clown*) when the person they're addressing has **NOT** used the name before.





# How do children learn to be informative communicators?

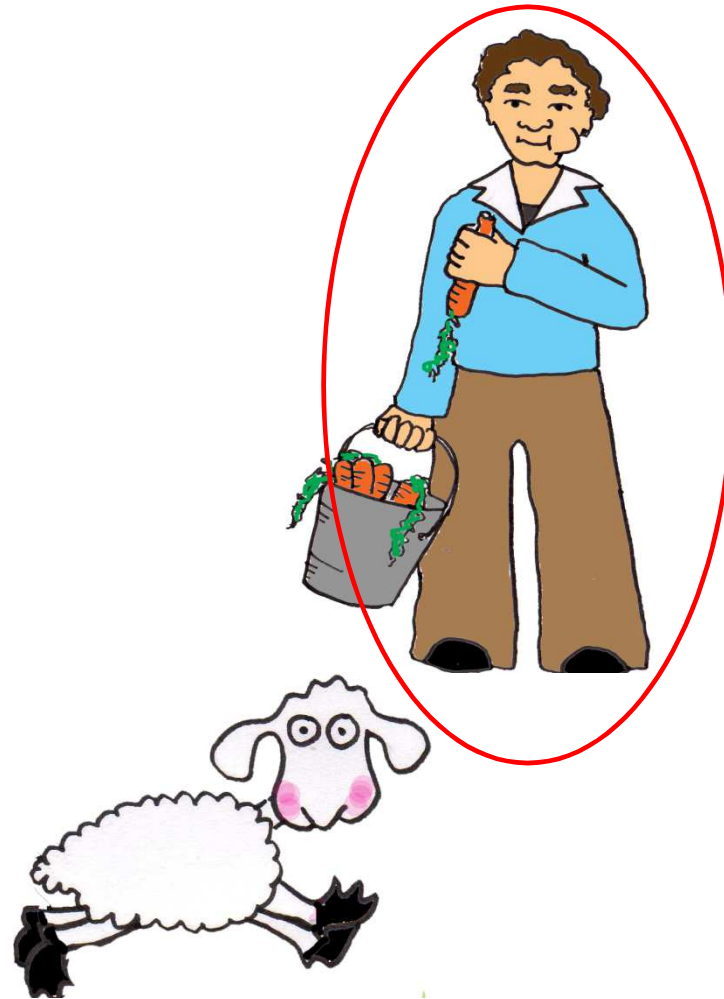
- To produce the right kind of referring expression, children need to appreciate when an alternative might be not be enough for the listener to know what is being referred to.

It's no good saying '*Give me the clown*' if there is more than one clown

- How good are children at providing unambiguous descriptions?

# 2 sticker array

(simple description will work)



# 4 sticker array

(complex description required)



# What do we know about preschool children's descriptions?

5-yr-olds typically not very skilled at providing sufficiently informative *spontaneous* object descriptions

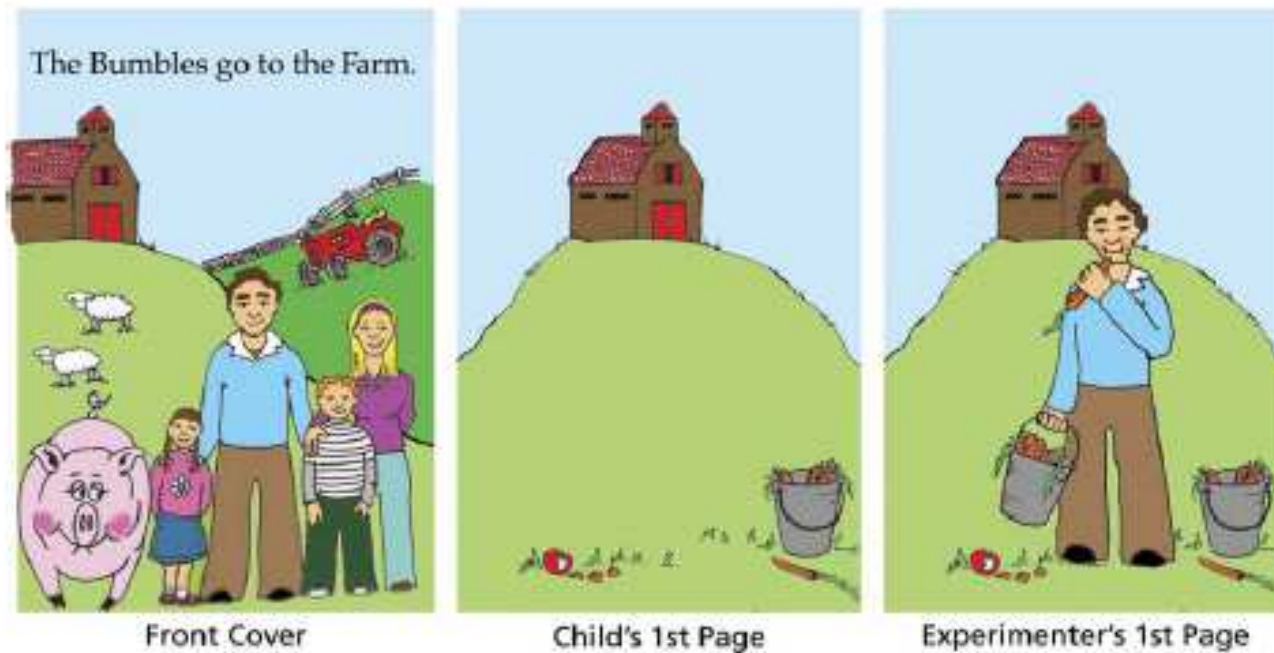
But younger children:

- Can repair failed communicative attempts at pre-verbal stage
- Can respond to clarification requests appropriately by age 2-3

BUT: do children know **why communication broke down** in the first place and can they benefit from feedback?

# A training study – the effects of giving children feedback

- 224 children (2, 3 & 4yrs)
- Sticker book game



# Method

- Child's task to ask E1 for stickers to match that in E2's sticker book
- Training occurred over 3 days.

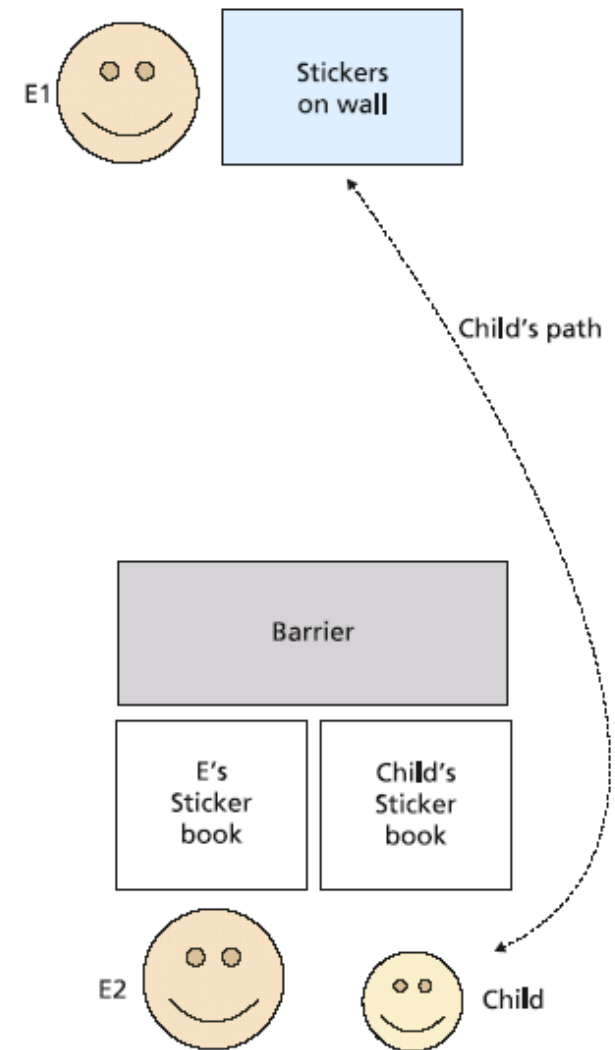


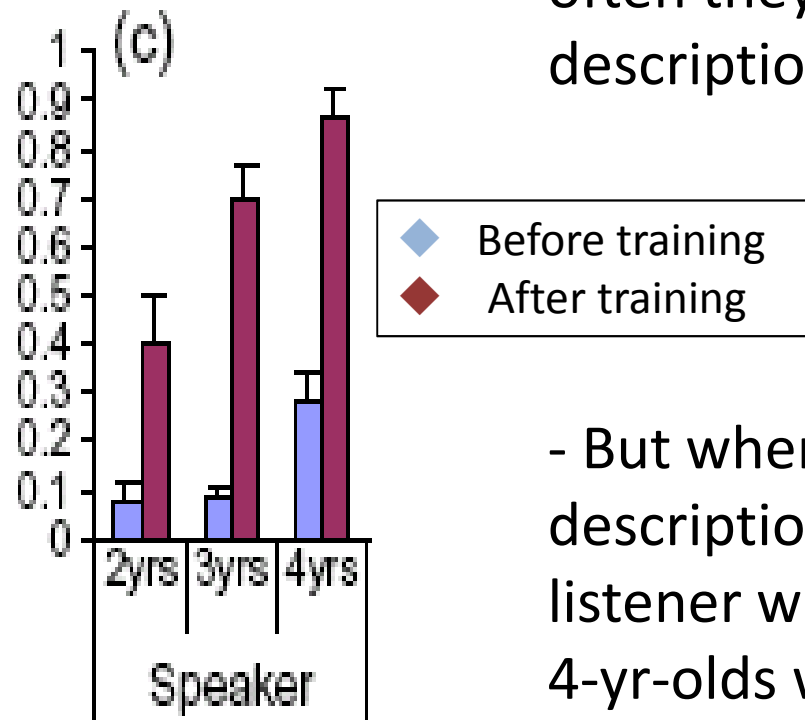
Figure 2. Layout of room for pre- and posttest.

# Training

- If child:
  - points, E asks C to tell her which sticker.
  - uses ambiguous linguistic referent, e.g. '*the girl one*', E asks '*the girl eating icecream or the girl dancing?*'
  - gives uniquely identifying referent, E gives child correct sticker

# Results

All age groups improved after training in how often they provided an **unambiguous** description to identify the required sticker



- But when tested on a second task (video description e.g. **The clown dancing...**) with a listener who had not seen the video, only the 4-yr-olds who received training provided more unambiguous descriptions



# 3. Constructing conversational narratives

## Informal language – examples

- Situated in here-and-now
  - Can you pass me that one?
- Assumes shared information with implied links between events and referents
  - How did it go yesterday?
  - Oh, well not great, he was scared again so we went home
  - That's a pity, maybe he'll get to like the ducks one day

## Formal language – examples

- Refers to past, present & future
- Longer sequences of related sentences
- Explicit links between events and referents
- Sequencing of events
  - When James and I went to the park (referent), there were lots of ducks splashing around (event). He was scared of them (refers back to established referents) so we decided to visit his Nana instead (linking cause and consequence)
- Essential for reasoning and negotiation skills, constructing narrative, scientific explanation etc.

## To produce successful narratives

- Children need to put more information into their sentences
- So they need to be able to use more complex sentences

# Complex sentences...



- Link ideas together:

- Adding information: *The flowers with stripes are unusual*
- Clarification: *You must eat the orange that I put in your bag*
- Time: *After dinner, you can have some cake*
- Cause: *We need our coats because it's cold*
- Consequence: *You can join in again if you apologise,*

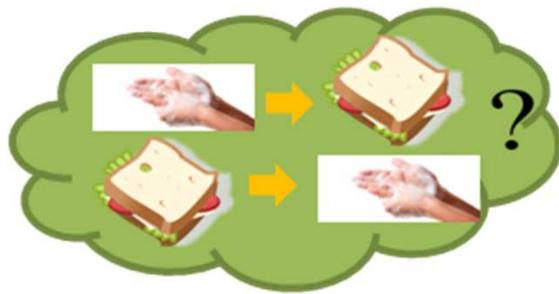
- Take different perspectives:

- *I think it's raining*
- *He thinks it's raining*



# Why are complex sentences difficult?

- Order of information in the sentence & the real world
- Before you eat your food, **wash your hands**

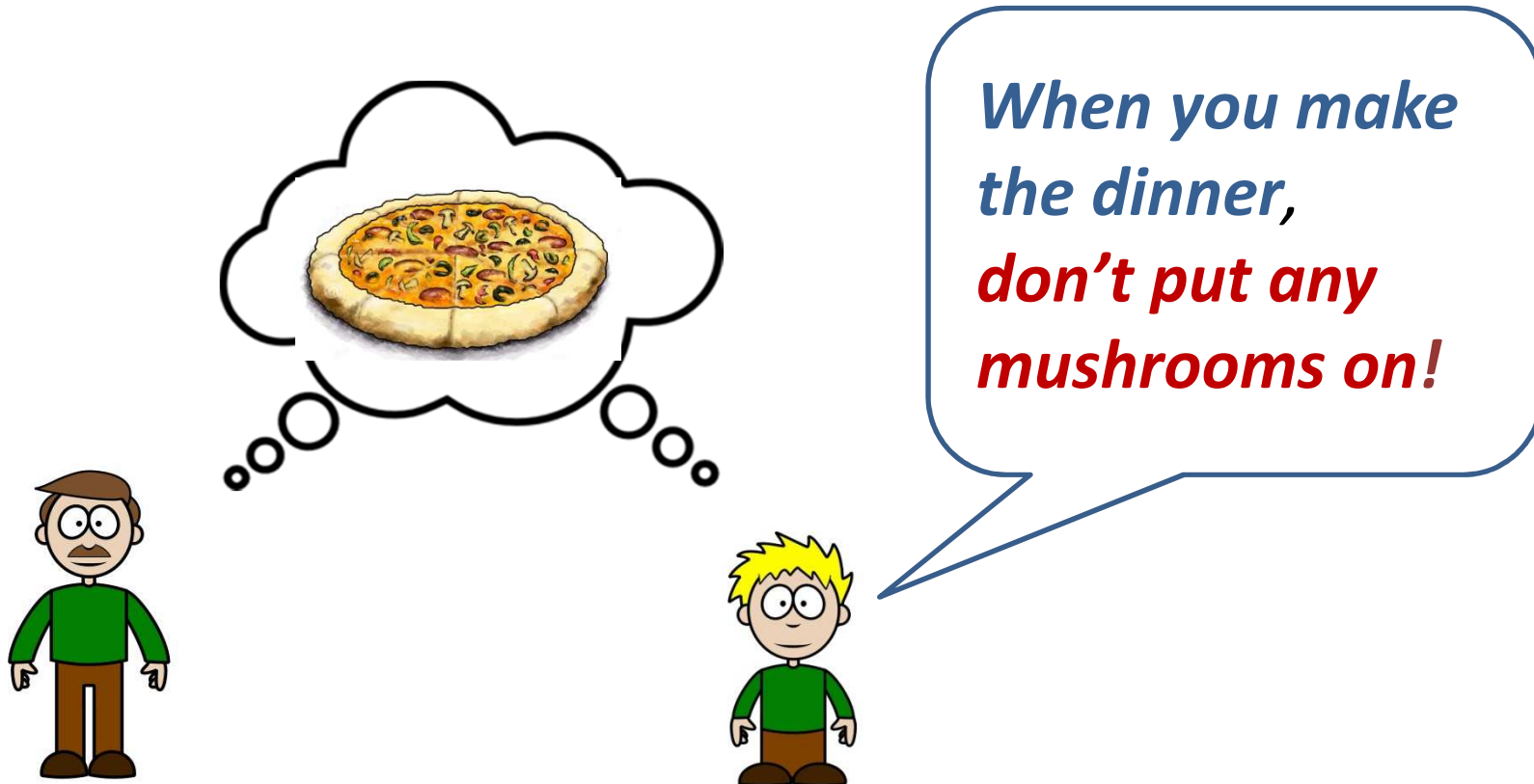


- Sit on the carpet after you've finished your pictures



# Why are complex sentences difficult?

- Depend on assessing what is **shared knowledge**
  - **Old** before **New**



# Telling stories: Short breakout session

Think up some examples of:

1. Children having difficulty telling a story
2. Children failing to understand who is who in a story



## Maus story



Maus goes for a walk and is enjoying the day. Before long, he stands at the edge of a cliff. Maus looks, sniffs the air, and then he backs up. Maus wants to jump to the other side. He flies half way across but stops in the air. Then Maus belly flops down into the hole. He scratches at the walls, trying to climb out. Maus doesn't want to spend his day in a hole. His tail spins like a helicopter and lifts him up. That's how you get yourself out of a deep hole.



# Narratives of differing complexity from 5yr olds

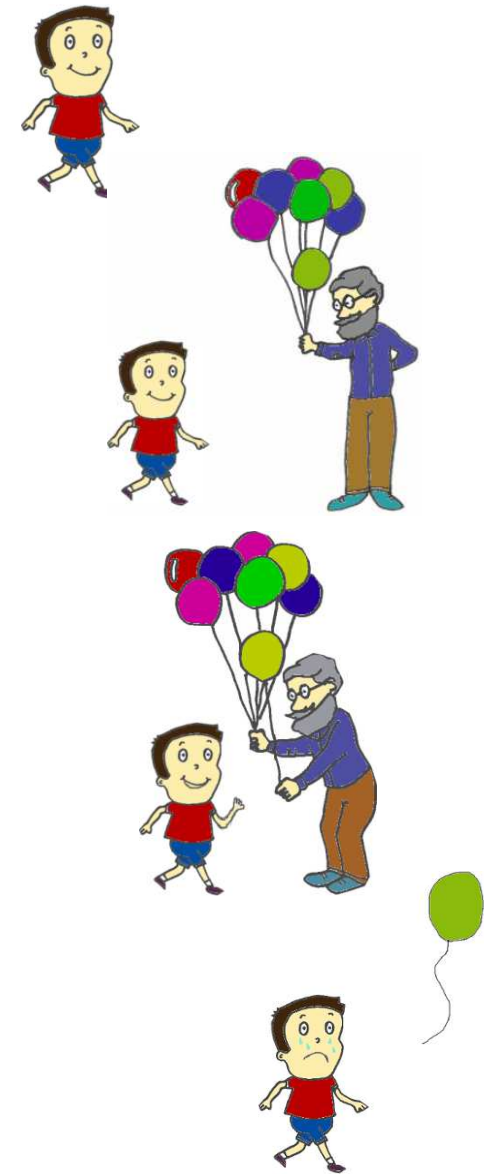
- Narrative without structure:
  - *I think tail flying.*
- Narrative with action sequence
  - *He was stuck in a hole, and his tail was spinning, and he got where—he was walking on the other side.*
- Narrative with goal-based structure
  - *Mouse was taking a walk and enjoying the day, but he fell in the hole, and he tried to get up and his tail spinned like a helicopter, and it took him up, and he said that's how you get out of a deep dark hole.*

## 4. Maintaining and changing perspectives in narratives

The little boy's walking along. He's in the sunshine and he's got a hat on. The man's giving him a balloon ... a green balloon. He asks for some money so he gives him some money and then he gives him the balloon. And then he goes home to show it to his mummy. But it's blowing in ... in the wind and he lost it, so he's crying because he can't have his balloon any more.

There's a little boy in red and he sees a balloon man and he takes a balloon and he goes off holding it. But he lets it go and loses it, so he starts to cry.

A little boy is walking home. He sees a balloon man. The balloon man gives him a green balloon, so he happily goes off home with it. But the balloon suddenly flies out of his hand and so he starts to cry.



# The role of parental style in narrative development

How do children learn about the structure of wider discourse?

- Exposure to extended speech?
- Strategies that promote children's attempts to use extended narrative?

# Different caregiver approaches to narrative

- Recall of facts (test) vs. co-constructing the past
  - Specific questions, and correction of factual information
  - Extended conversations with caregivers asking open-ended questions (**where, when, what, why, how**), and providing detailed information
- Extension of topic vs. switching topic
  - Extension into causes, consequences
  - Switching skims the surface only

→ Caregivers who extend topics with open-ended questions at 2yrs have children with better independent narrative skills a year later

# Enhancing explanatory speech

- Educational guidelines highlight the importance of children's 'discussion' skills
  - Explaining
  - Justifying
  - Reasoning
- Children with weak discussion skills may be ignored by their peers
- Can children's linguistic skills be enhanced by intervention?

# Cooperative contexts may promote use of complex language

- 4yr olds took part in 5-day intervention
- Task to teach aliens (Zig & Zag) to speak
- Day 1 – language models from Experimenter
  - Control condition (claim-question-response)
    - A: *I am an alien.*
    - B: *Where from?*
    - A: *From another planet.*
  - Intervention condition (claim-question-justification)
    - A: *I am an alien.*
    - B: *Why?*
    - A: *Because I come from another planet.*
- Days 2-5, children's puppet interactions assessed, E support provided as needed according to condition

# Results

Children in intervention condition used more 'why' questions and 'because' justifications.

Children in control condition made more claims.

Suggests modelling cause-effect explanations can enhance usage

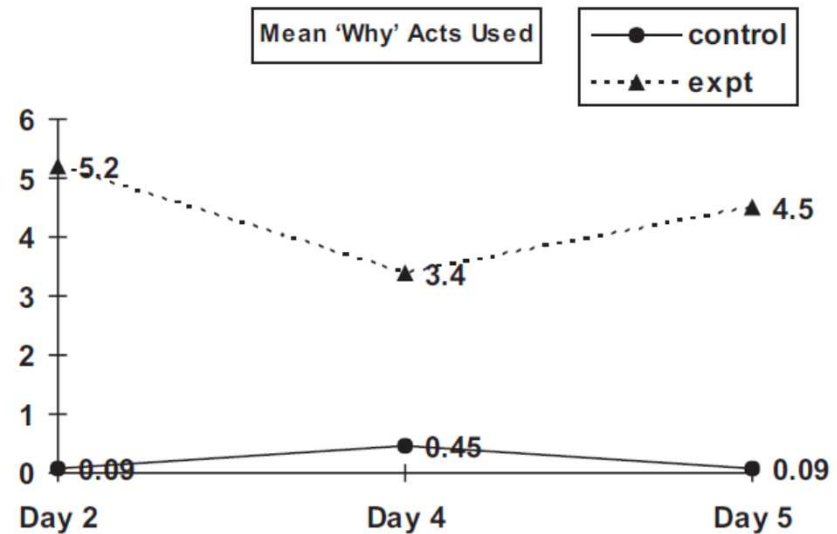


Figure 2 The dyadic mean number of 'why' acts across days and conditions

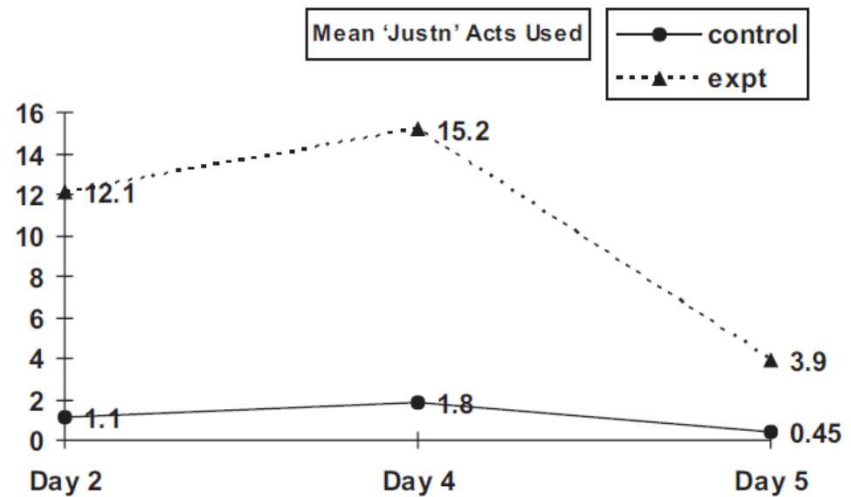


Figure 3 The dyadic mean number of 'justification' acts across days and conditions

# Summary

- Babies know a lot but have more to learn
- Children slowly learn to take account of others' points of view and to reflect this appropriately in their language.
- Children gradually learn to create more interconnected conversation and stories
- Parents and practitioners can support this development by providing opportunities for extended conversation about the past, the present and the future!



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