The Relationship Between Mental-state Language and False-belief Understanding in Adulthood

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Abstract: Research has revealed a robust relationship between preschooler’s use of mental-state language (e.g. think, know) and performance on false-belief tasks (e.g. Ruffman, Slade & Crow, 2002). However, investigations of this relationship with school-aged children have shown mixed results, making it unclear whether mental-state talk continues to play a role in false-belief understanding following the preschool years (e.g. Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998; Grazzini & Ornaghi, 2012). This discrepancy may result from the fact that preschooler’s talk has consistently been assessed during interpersonal interactions with peers, siblings, and parents, while school-aged children’s talk has been assessed via descriptions of wordless picture books or absent friends. The present study bridges this gap by exploring whether adults’ use of mental-state language during interaction correlates with their false-belief performance. In doing so, we help to shed light on an important issue in theoretical accounts of the development of false-belief understanding.