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The power of print: Children's trust in unexpected printed suggestions



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ABSTRACT

How do children evaluate the veracity of printed text? We examined children's handling of unexpected suggestions conveyed via print versus orally. In Experiment 1 ($N = 131$), 3- to 6-year-olds witnessed a speaker either read aloud an unexpected but not completely implausible printed label (e.g., *fish* for a bird-like animal with some fish features) or speak the label without accompanying text. Pre-readers accepted labels in both conditions. Early readers often rejected spoken labels yet accepted them in the print condition, and in Experiment 2 ($N = 55$) 3- to 6-year-olds continued to apply them even after the print was obscured. Early readers accept printed testimony that they reject if only spoken, and the influence of text endures even when it is no longer visible.

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Introduction

Imagine you are visiting the Museum of the Royal Academy of Music with a friend and you come across a musical instrument that you have never seen before but which you think closely resembles a clarinet. The printed label alongside it says *saxophone*, which seems unlikely given the instrument's shape. Should you trust the information conveyed by the label even though it conflicts with your expectations? What if the information had been provided by your friend rather than a printed label? Would that make it more or less compelling? Literate adults can draw on a range of criteria, knowledge, and past experiences when evaluating the trustworthiness of both printed information and spoken testimony. Pre-readers and early readers have a number of criteria to evaluate spoken testimony,

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but they are unlikely yet to have had much opportunity to learn about the potential fallibility of print. In the following studies, we compared how young children handle unexpected, relatively implausible information conveyed through print with how they handle the same information conveyed orally.

Evaluating oral testimony

Typically developing young children have extensive experience in gaining knowledge about the world from what other people tell them. Csibra and Gergely (2006) suggested that information sharing is a primary evolutionary adaptation; human adults have adapted to transfer knowledge, and infants and children have adapted to receive it. Consistent with this argument, Jaswal, Croft, Setia, and Cole (2010) argued that children have a “highly robust bias to trust (spoken) testimony.” A bias to believe is efficient because it allows listeners to sidestep the time-consuming and sometimes impossible task of evaluating the veracity of everything they are told. Although people do sometimes say things that are wrong, they usually do their best to tell children (and each other) things they believe to be true (e.g., Grice, 1975; Jaswal, in press).

Indeed, children are willing to believe all kinds of unlikely things they hear—that an object they had seen fall into one location is actually in another location (Jaswal, 2010), that a sticker is hidden in one place even when there is strong evidence that the informant is trying to trick them (Jaswal et al., 2010; see also Mascaro & Sperber, 2009), and that a cat-like animal with some dog-like features is a dog, especially when the speaker’s communicative intent is made salient (Jaswal, 2004).

Although being receptive to information from others is clearly beneficial, suspicion and rejection of testimony is sometimes warranted, as when someone says something obviously false. Indeed, even 16-month-old infants will reject an adult’s blatantly incorrect suggestion—for example, that a duck is a ball (Koenig & Echols, 2003; Pea, 1982). As children get older, they become increasingly sophisticated at evaluating the likely truth of what they are told, developing what Sperber and colleagues (2010) called *epistemic vigilance*. Despite this, of course, neither older children’s nor adults’ skills at evaluating the trust of what others say are perfect, as demonstrated in the extensive literatures on suggestibility and more specifically on susceptibility to misleading questioning in legal contexts (e.g., Roberts & Blades, 2000).

In what has become a standard procedure for investigating selective trust, Koenig, Clément, and Harris (2004) presented 3- and 4-year-olds with two potential informants, one of whom had a history of naming familiar objects accurately and the other of whom had named them inaccurately for no obvious reason. Both informants then offered different labels for an unfamiliar object. Across a number of studies, 4-year-olds prefer the label offered by the previously accurate informant over that offered by the previously inaccurate one, and 3-year-olds do so under some conditions (Birch, Vauthier, & Bloom, 2008; Clément, Koenig, & Harris, 2004; Koenig & Harris, 2005; Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009b).

Variations of the procedure have been used to examine the range of criteria young children apply when deciding whether or not to believe what they are told. For example, 4-year-olds accept suggestions from someone familiar over a stranger (Corriveau & Harris, 2009), trust an expert over a novice (Koenig & Jaswal, 2011), and generally prefer learning new words from an adult rather than from a child (Jaswal & Neely, 2006). Furthermore, children believe informants who claim certainty over those who express doubt (Jaswal & Malone, 2007; Sabbagh & Baldwin, 2001; Tenney, Small, Kondrad, Jaswal, & Spellman, 2011).

Children are also sensitive to the magnitude and frequency of errors (Einav & Robinson, 2010; Kondrad & Jaswal, 2012; Pasquini, Corriveau, Koenig, & Harris, 2007) and reasons for speaker accuracy/inaccuracy (Einav & Robinson, 2011; Kondrad & Jaswal, 2012; Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009a; Robinson & Nurmsoo, 2009; Robinson & Whitcombe, 2003).

Despite these many competencies in judging whether or not to believe what they are told, there are, of course, still circumstances under which 4-year-olds are overly trusting (e.g., Lee, Cameron, Doucette, & Talwar, 2002), and there is over-generalization of trust or mistrust (Brosseau-Liard & Birch, 2009; Koenig & Jaswal, 2011) as well as over-caution (Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009b). For example, Brosseau-Liard and Birch (2009) found that 5-year-olds (but not 4-year-olds) expected a previously knowledgeable (accurate) informant to remain knowledgeable in the future even across different domains. Nurmsoo and Robinson (2009b) found that children were no more likely to believe

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