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## Cognitive Development



# Real or Not? Informativeness Influences Children's Reality Status Judgments



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### ABSTRACT

Do children use the Gricean maxim of informativeness (“Make your contribution as informative as is required”) to guide judgments about the reality status of novel entities? In three studies, 9-year-olds watched video clips of two adults discussing novel entities. In Studies 1 and 2, children were less likely to believe in entities introduced with only explicit belief statements (e.g., “I believe in cusk”) than those introduced with other information (e.g., “We saw some cusk in the trees”) or both explicit belief statements and other information. In Study 3, children were more likely to believe in entities about which speakers made an explicit belief statement and appeared to be providing additional information (even though that information was unintelligible) than those about which they only made an explicit belief statement. Consistent with the maxim of informativeness, 9-year-olds expect speakers to introduce novel entities by providing more information about them than a mere statement of belief.

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How do children learn the reality status of things they have heard about but have never seen—that germs are real, for example, but ghosts are not? One possibility is that speakers could mark whether an entity was real or not each time they made reference to that entity. But they generally do not do this. Indeed, people often talk about both real and fantastical non-observable entities as if they were real: “Germs make you sick” and “Ghosts are scary.” In the studies here, we investigated the possibility that

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one cue children use to decide whether a novel entity is real is the amount of information a speaker provides. Simply put, if a speaker introduces a novel entity without providing any details about it (or, as we will show, without *appearing* to provide any details about it), children may question its existence.

Our hypothesis follows from one of the two Gricean maxims of quantity—namely, informativeness: Listeners expect speakers to make their contributions as informative as is required (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Previous work suggests that children may be sensitive to violations of informativeness on an implicit level as early as four years of age (Eskritt, Whalen, & Lee, 2008), and on an explicit level by the age of 6 or 7 (Ackerman, 1981; Conti & Camras, 1984). For example, in one of the stories used by Conti and Camras (1984), children heard speakers discussing what they wanted to be when they grew up, with two different story endings. First graders, but not preschoolers, indicated that the story ending in which the speaker responded by saying she wanted to be an adult was “funny or silly” compared to the story ending in which the speaker responded by saying she wanted to be a teacher. The “I want to be an adult” response, while technically appropriate, is not informative. One might even refer to the speaker who says this as a “smart aleck,” because of course all children will grow up to be adults.

In the context of a conversation about a real novel entity, an informative contribution would link that entity to the listener’s existing knowledge base. This could take many forms, including information about its origin, size, shape, smell, causal properties, similarity to other things, and so on. Indeed, a recent study by found that 10-year-olds were more likely to believe in novel entities that were described with elaborate compared to simple descriptions. For example, they were more likely to believe in entities described with two informative statements (e.g., “Sernets are small fish that live at the bottom of the Great Lakes. Sernets have sharp teeth that they use to eat zebra mussels”) than to believe in entities described with one fairly general, less informative statement (e.g., “Sernets run when they are scared”) even when both were described in a scientific context. Elaborate descriptions can, of course, also be provided about entities that are not real (e.g., “Ghosts are the souls of dead people,” “Fairies live in the forest”). But given that a courteous speaker is expected to do his or her best to create common ground with the listener (Clark, 1996), a failure to offer informative testimony about a novel entity—to simply say, for example, “I believe in X” or “Xs are real” without any details—could lead a listener to question its existence.

Interestingly, an explicit belief statement like “I believe in X” may lead a listener to doubt the existence of an entity not only because it provides too little information, but also because in another sense it provides too much. As noted earlier, there are two parts to Grice’s (1975) maxim of quantity. The first, as we have argued, is that listeners expect speakers to make their contributions as informative as required. The second is that listeners expect speakers will not make their contributions more informative than required. When a speaker purposely provides extra information, Grice suggests that it could be “an oblique way of conveying that it is to some degree controversial whether or not” what the speaker says is true, or even that the speaker is not certain of what s/he says (p. 53).

When discussing real things—both observable and unobservable—we rarely stipulate that we believe in them. But when adults and children talk about culturally endorsed fantastical beings, like Santa Claus, conversations about their existence are much more common (e.g., “Santa is real” and “I believe in Santa”). Harris, Pasquini, Duke, Asscher, and Pons (2006) have argued that as children learn that culturally endorsed fantastical beings are not real, they might also detect this difference in the way real versus endorsed entities are discussed. That is, they might come to recognize that the reality status of real things is almost never the topic of conversation, but the reality status of fantastical things is (Canfield & Ganea, 2013). Harris et al. hypothesized that children who have detected this difference might assign questionable reality status to entities that are introduced with an explicit belief statement.

One experimental study addresses this possibility. Woolley, Ma, and Lopez-Mobilis (2011) presented children with videos of conversations in which adults either implicitly acknowledged the existence of a novel entity (e.g., Speaker A: “When we went to Africa this summer, we saw a baby *dugong* being born!” Speaker B: “Wow, that’s neat. When we went there, we met some people who were trying to protect *dugongs* from hunters”) or explicitly acknowledged the existence of a

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