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Learning how to use the verb 'want': A corpus study

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Abstract

Children's production of mental state verbs is studied to research their theory of mind and general cognitive development. Desire verbs are a rich resource as children produce them frequently and early in development, with 'want' being of the most frequent production. We report on a corpus study of 450+ instances of 'want' as gathered from dialogues with children in CHILDES. We describe a novel coding scheme that measures the semantic development of 'want' utterances, such as the use of negation, clause type, complement subject, and the semantic type of the complement, in addition to more conventional categories. We report on these features' frequencies for children aged 2-4. Noteworthy findings suggest that children talk about their own desires most often, but as they grow older, they talk more about others' desires; they desire more complex objects as they mature; and they primarily use questions to talk about second person desires.