

The pragmatic meaning of Italian evaluative morphology: how encoded emotions support the recovery of linguistic abilities in aphasic subjects.

Abstract: It has been widely demonstrated that diminutives have a pragmatic value and are often an expression of emotions. This is shown mostly in children who first acquire evaluative morphology with a pragmatic meaning, while its semantics appears later in a second step. In this work I explore this particular behavior in the field of Italian diminutive morphology, which is a powerful linguistic tool for emotion coding. I argue for the prevalence of a pragmatic/emotional core upon the semantic/dimensional level, using the following test: I asked a subject affected by transcortical motor aphasia, with serious deficit in inflectional and derivational morphology, to build diminutives answering two specific questions, corresponding to different production tasks: (a) "How would you say small X?" and (b) "If you are addressing a baby or a beloved person, how would you say X?". Inducing the differentiation between quantitative and qualitative meaning, I observed a significant variance among the performances in terms of ratio of correct answers between question (a) (23%) and question (b) (56%). These findings suggest that evaluative morphology makes use of cognitive processes, located in the right hemisphere of the brain, for correctly completing the task, thus overcoming the linguistic level damaged by the disease. With the experiment presented here I support the idea of a link between the right hemisphere, seats of emotions, and the left one, seats of language, and I demonstrate the power of evaluative morphology as a tool for improving performances in aphasic subjects.