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The Use of Mental State Verbs by Preschool-Age Children Who Stutter and Their Mothers

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Mental state verbs (MSVs) denote internal cognitive states (e.g., think, believe, remember, understand). They are more abstract than other types of verbs, such as action verbs, and are likely to be embedded in utterances that are more conceptually complex. For example, “She **forgot** [MSV] his name” is more abstract than “She **said** [action] his name”. Logan’s (2015) working model of speech fluency includes the dimension of communicative flexibility – the ability to shift among communicative contexts. In this preliminary study, through analysis of MSVs, we explored one type of communicative flexibility in children who stutter (CWS) and children who do not stutter (CWNS) as they shifted from action-based conversation with their mothers to interaction that emphasized internal mental states. We hypothesized that CWS may be less flexible than peers in shifting from action-focused language to more inward focused language about thoughts and other internal mental states. Through examination of the play-based language samples of 30 CWS and 30 age- and gender-matched CWNS (ages 3;0-5;10) with their mothers, we explored (a) the frequency of MSV use among the groups of children and their mothers, (b) the correspondence between mothers’ use of MSVs and their children’s use, and (c) the proportion of utterances with MSVs that contain stutter-like and other disfluencies. Results will be discussed in relation to the idea that mental state verbs may reveal information about a child’s communicative flexibility in conversation.