

Acquisition of Relative Clauses by Cantonese Children

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Abstract

Subject relatives have been found to be easier than relative clauses (RCs) involving extraction from other positions for processing (Wanner and Maratsos, 1978; Traxler et al., 2002) and acquisition (de Villiers et al., 1979; Hamburger and Crain, 1982; Diessel and Tomasello, 2005) in both head-initial languages (such as English) and head-final languages (such as Japanese). However, the situation is less clear for languages such as Chinese in which the head-position and the placement of RCs are disharmonic, and existing theories make contradictory predictions for the relative difficulty of subject and object RCs.

Two experiments were conducted using imitation and act-out tasks with thirty-one children Cantonese monolingual children aged 4 to 6. The stimuli were manipulated for (i) the position of the head NP being relativized (Subject, Agent, Patient, Indirect Object, Oblique and Genitive) and (ii) construction of the main clause (transitive/intransitive main clause versus copular construction) and controlled for length and semantic factors. The results from both tasks showed the best performance on Subject-extracted relatives, followed by Agent-extracted and Patient-extracted relatives, forming a hierarchy with significant differences. The experimental results show concordance with the developmental predictions derived from Keenan and Comrie's (1977) NP accessibility hierarchy, thus reinforcing its universality.