

Prosodic and syntactic focus-marking in the acquisition of focus comprehension: A view from Hungarian

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The acquisition of the comprehension of prosodically marked focus has usually been described as a particularly protracted developmental process. Some recent studies suggest, however, that when the experimental task is appropriately simplified, the ability to accurately identify focus based on its prosodic marking is in place already during preschool years, at least in languages like English in which focus is primarily marked prosodically (by stress).

This talk reports on an experimental study of 4-to-6-year-old children acquiring Hungarian, a language which routinely uses syntactic focus-marking (SFM) (by fronting). In this language, SFM is a highly reliable surface cue of focus, while the functional load of prosodic focus marking (PFM) is relatively reduced.

Our goal was to investigate how this particular division of labour shapes the trajectories of focus-comprehension based on PFM and on SFM, respectively.

To this end, we measured the rate of accurate focus-identifications in a comprehension task involving the correction of false sentences in three within-subject conditions: PFM-only (sentences without syntactic focus-disambiguation), SFM-only (sentences devoid of prosodic cues, i.e. without prosodic focus-disambiguation), and PFM+SFM.

We show that the results are not predicted either by a classic cue-based approach or by Reinhart's reference-set computation based approach, and propose a modification of the latter.