

(A)typical trajectories of complex sentence comprehension from pre-school-age to adolescence

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Children need some time to attune their parser to the properties of the language(s) they are exposed to. As a result, some complex structures continue to pose difficulties for young comprehenders until school entry (Durrleman & Bentea, 2021; Schipke et al. 2012; Macdonald et al., 2020).

The gradual development of complex sentence comprehension abilities in children has been linked with the degree of accessibility and reliability of certain input properties, such as word order and case marking (e.g., seminal work from McWhinney et al., 1984; Bates et al., 1999) as well as animacy and pronominality of nominal constituents (Kidd et al., 2007 among others).

Taking a complementary perspective to these lines of research, the psycholinguistic studies that we have conducted over the past decade aimed to test the gradual effect of various morphological properties such as number-, gender- and case-marking on comprehension of complex sentences. In this talk, I will discuss published and unpublished data from child speakers of Italian, English, Hebrew and German, across different groups of typically developing children and children and adolescents with developmental disorders. An instance of the complex sentences that will be discussed in the talk are object-initial declarative sentences and object-extracted relative clauses.

I propose that different theories of language development do not need to be contrasted to one another, but their predictions can actually co-exist (Adani et al., 2017). This approach provides complementary perspectives (as well as a considerable explanatory overlap) on how young children make use of their resources to gradually master complex sentences.

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