

Re-thinking the Acquisition of Relatives: A new Comprehension study with Italian Children

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Abstract

In a number of studies, the acquisition of restrictive relative clauses (RCs) shows contrasting findings regarding comprehension and production, with the former usually delayed up to the age of 5. As previously claimed in the literature, we suggest that this delay is a task artefact and we present a new Agent selection task for the assessment of restrictive RCs. Data from 3- to 7-year-old Italian children were collected and results show that, once processing and pragmatic factors are controlled for, children understand object relatives from the age of 4 whereas subject relatives are at ceiling from 3. We consider our results as evidence of continuity between early and adult competence grammars. Children's non-target responses are interpreted as grammatical options exploited by an immature performance system, which obeys the same economy principles of structure representation as in adult competence.