

Young children's demonstration of adult-like syntactic competence—evidence from Mandarin Chinese

Dong-Bo Hsu

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan, Taiwan, R.O.C.

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Abstract: This study investigated whether Mandarin-speaking children can demonstrate adult-like syntactic competence. Mandarin-speaking 2-, 3-, 4-, 5-year-olds' and adults' comprehension of agent-patient relations across four Mandarin transitive constructions with the novel verbs: SVO construction, ba-construction, subjectless ba-construction, and topicalization construction were examined using a forced choice pointing paradigm when identical actions were used with only participants reversed in the foil and target videos. Mandarin-speaking children and adults demonstrated a similar pattern on comprehending the agent-patient relations across these four types of transitive constructions, though younger children employed a partial but abstract representation for comprehension. Mandarin-speakers tend to use a good enough syntactic representation of [1st NP-Agent, 2nd NP-Patient] and the salience of the objective marker ba to comprehend the transitive construction