

Prosodic and syntactic focus-marking: Cues and competitions in the acquisition of focus comprehension

Surányi Balázs

HUN-REN Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics, Budapest, Hungary. Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

The comprehension of prosodically marked focus poses an outstanding challenge at preschool ages, despite close to adult-like patterns in production (Höhle et al. 2016). The source of this asymmetric acquisition delay is still ill-understood. A major unresolved question is to what extent it derives from the compromised strength of prosodic marking of focus as a surface cue, in line with the functional cue-based Competition Model (Bates & MacWhinney 1987, MacWhinney 2005, 2018).

To address this question we conducted an experimental study to compare the acquisition trajectories of the comprehension of prosodically marked and syntactically marked focus in four- (n=24), five- (n=24) and six-year-old children (n=24) acquiring Hungarian, and in an adult control group (n=24). Hungarian is a language that employs obligatory focus-fronting to the immediately pre-verbal position, making SFM an especially strong surface cue of focus, while the cue strength of prosodic focus marking (PFM) by stress is relatively reduced. The acquisition of SFM is seriously under-studied, and to our knowledge this is the first experiment to directly compare PFM and SFM in the same language.

We measured the rates of accurate focus-identifications in subject-focus and verb-focus sentences (=Focus Type) in a comprehension task that required participants to correct false sentences based on visual stimuli in three within-subject conditions (tested in three consecutive sessions one week apart): PFM-only (sentences without syntactic focus-disambiguation), SFM-only (sentences stripped of prosodic cues, i.e. without prosodic focus-disambiguation), and PFM+SFM (sentences with both syntactic and prosodic disambiguation) (=Focus-Marking Type).

Both binomial GLMM and Bayesian ANOVA yielded the following main findings. (1) Focus Type had no effect and was not in interaction with Age Group. (2) Children exhibited adult-like levels of accurate focus-identification only at age 6, in line with earlier results. (3) Crucially, Focus-Marking Type had no effect and did not interact with Age Group. This key finding is unexpected on the cue-strength based Competition Model, which predicts an advantage of SFM in this language, while, as we argue, it can be explained by a processing model of formal markedness driven competition of alternative linguistic forms (Reinhart 2004, Hendricks et al. 2007).

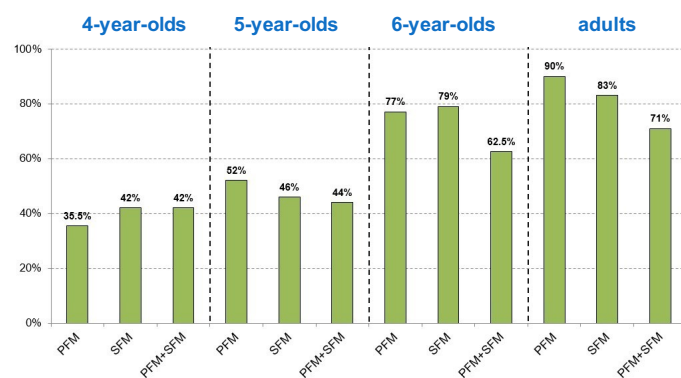
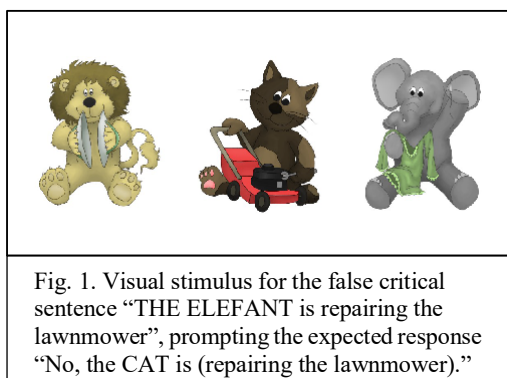


Fig. 2. Rates of congruent corrections, reflecting correct focus identification, in the subject-focus condition

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