

Abstract knowledge of word order before age 2
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In this talk, I will address the lively controversy about the nature of early grammatical knowledge through the study of the development of word order. The debate opposes the constructivist view of language acquisition, according to which word order develops from lexically specific schemas formed around frequent verbs and only slowly becomes abstract, to the abstractionist view that word order develops early on as a formal property of the sentences, independently of the lexical units that compose it. I will start by reviewing the experimental evidence supporting the constructivist hypothesis, and question the validity of the conclusions on a variety of grounds that have to do with the experimental methods used, the analysis of the data and their interpretation, as well as the presence of key observations that have been ignored and that actually support early abstract word order knowledge. I will then present a series of eye-tracking studies conducted in French in my lab showing that children around 20 months correctly interpret canonical SVO sentences but also non-canonical OSV sentences involving object movement, while they show no systematic interpretation of ungrammatical SOV sentences. Children's performance on OSV and SOV structures shows that they do not make use of heuristics like assigning the agent role to the first noun, and since all the studies were conducted on sentences using nonce verbs, performance could not have relied on lexical knowledge either. Rather, the evidence supports the hypothesis that children develop early abstract knowledge of the word order of French and of the movement options allowed by the language. I will conclude by discussing prosodic bootstrapping as a possible mechanism through which the child develops this knowledge.