

The acquisition of A'-dependencies: Intervention and scope-discourse properties

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Young children experience selective difficulties with the production and comprehension of certain A-bar dependencies in which an object moves across a subject. Much recent work stemming from Friedmann, Belletti & Rizzi 2009 and inspired by Grillo's 2008 approach to agrammatism has addressed this issue by interpreting the observed difficulties as cases of intervention, tracing back the effect to the featural version of Relativized Minimality. In the first part of this talk we will rethink some conceptual issues and empirical problems raised by such a grammar-based approach to a developmental problem: what varies between child and adult systems? What determines the observed development? How do the observed intervention effects relate to familiar intervention effects in adult grammars, e.g., violations of Weak Islands?

In the second part we will discuss a number of intervention configurations illustrated by constructions in which discourse properties are directly implicated, such as sentences involving (contrastive) topics in clitic left dislocated constructions (CLLD), different types of passives (building on ongoing joint work, Manetti & Belletti 2015, Manetti et al. 2015, Belletti & Manetti 2016) as well as sentences in which the intervening subject is postverbal and has new information focus interpretation (Belletti & Contemori 2012). We show that young children master the discourse conditions leading to appropriate production and comprehension of these structures from early on; they do so, however, in compliance with Relativized Minimality operating in a stricter fashion than in the adult system, along the lines of the approach discussed in the first part, thus misinterpreting or avoiding the hardest intervention configurations.