
Building abstractions in language development

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Most accounts of child language acquisition use as analytic tools adult-like syntactic categories and grammars with little concern for whether they are psychologically real for young children. However when approached from a cognitive and functional theoretical perspective, recent research has demonstrated that children do not operate initially with such abstract linguistic entities, but instead construct more abstract linguistic representations only gradually - on the basis of linguistic experience in which the consistency of markers, the complexity of the construction in question and relative type and token frequencies within and across constructions play a key role. In this talk I will address these issues using research that employs naturalistic, experimental and modelling methodologies and that is applied to a range of languages.