Abstract:

Why are children better than adults at learning language, even though they are worse at other cognitive tasks? Previous accounts have focused on cognitive or biological differences between children and adults. In my research, I focus instead on the way prior knowledge and experience impact the linguistic units that children and adults learn from. In particular, I propose that children rely more than adults on multiword units in learning language and that this impacts learning outcomes. The proposal offers an additional perspective on L1-L2 differences by re-assessing the the basic building blocks of language. Traditionally, words are seen as the basic building blocks for language. Multiword sequences, in contrast, are thought to be generated from words and rarely treated as units. Recent years have seen a shift from this perspective with growing evidence for the role of multiword units in language learning and use. In this talk, I will present developmental, computational and psycholinguistic findings to argue that (a) multiword units are integral building blocks in language, (b) that they play an important role in first language acquisition and can facilitate learning of grammatical relations, and (c) that adults rely on them less, a pattern which can explain (some of) the differences between children and adults in language learning. Together, the findings blur the distinction between grammar and lexicon and offer a novel framework for why children and adults differ in their language learning abilities, while also proposing a model of language use and representation that
diverges from traditional assumptions.

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