

Learning word order: early beginnings

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In this talk, I examine the beginning of the acquisition of the relative order of function and content words, a fundamental but cross-linguistically highly variable aspect of grammar. I present a series of behavioral studies showing that infants as young as 8 months of age can distinguish between function and content words, showing sensitivity to their distinctive features (function, open- vs. closed-class membership, different frequency distributions and phonological differences) and have a rudimentary knowledge of the order of these two universal lexical categories in their native language. I will also present studies suggesting that human adults and non-human animals such as rodents process the same linguistic information differently from infants, emphasizing the developmental relevance of bootstrapping function/content word order from surface cues available in the input. I discuss the implications of these findings for a synergistic view of language acquisition, considering how grammar acquisition interacts with word learning.