

Setting the head – complement parameter?

Marina Nespór

Mohinish Shukla

Ruben van de Vijver

Univeristy of Ferrara

SISSA

University of Potsdam

On of the most discussed issues in language acquisition concerns the relative role played in the process by general learning mechanisms and by mechanisms specific to language. We propose that while both types of mechanisms are involved in the acquisition of different aspects of language, the common assumption that the first type is mainly engaged in the segmentation of connected speech and the identification of lexical items (Saffran et al.1996), and the latter in the extraction of abstract regularities from the speech stream (Peña, et al 2002), is not totally adequate.

We will discuss parameter setting and the mechanisms that might be responsible for it. While we know that for the mechanism of parameter setting to make sense, at least some of the basic parameters relating to word order should be set before the infant has knowledge of the lexicon (Mazuka 1996), little is known about how parameters are actually set. On the basis of the analysis of one syntactic parameter and its phonetic correlates in Turkish and French, we will propose a) that it is conceivable that this parameter is set very early in life on the basis of information contained in the signal, and b) that parameter setting might be mediated by general perception mechanisms.

Specifically we analyzed the acoustic correlates of the head-complement parameter and propose that in addition to the location of main prominence within phonological phrases (Nespor & Vogel 1986), the realization of prominence distinguishes the two types of languages: stress at this level is realized more through pitch in OV languages and more through lengthening in VO languages. This different realization of prominence will force the infant in the correct grouping of heads and complements and thus make possible the setting of this basic syntactic parameter at the prelexical stage. Crucially, the different grouping according to the specific realization of prominence is not domain specific (Woodrow 1951; Krumhansl, & Jusczyk 1990).

German, a language in which both orders are possible, is analyzed to confirm the hypothesis.

