

Listening to the Tune: Sentence-level prosody in acquisition.

Different languages have different prosodic systems and thus different “melodies” or “tunes”. Prosody plays an important role in pre-verbal infants’ language acquisition. In particular, infant-directed speech has many prosodic characteristics that may facilitate language acquisition. And, in fact, pre-verbal infants use prosodic cues to segment the speech they hear into words and to discover initial syntactic constituent structures. In contrast to this, older children (six and even older) seem to have difficulty interpreting prosodic cues in an adult-like manner. Why do older children perform so poorly on prosodic tests when pre-verbal infants use prosodic cues in such a sophisticated manner?

In this presentation, I will use data from two groups of learners that have so far been neglected – young children and L2 learners – to shed some light on why there may be such a discrepancy between infants’ and older children’s use of prosodic cues. The experiments focus on two sentence-level prosodic phenomena – prosodic phrasing and contrastive accentuation – in the context of language acquisition. Prosodic phrasing can provide information about sentences’ constituent structure and contrastive accentuation can provide information about upcoming referents.

I will present data from two experiments with young verbal children and one experiment with native-German L2 learners of English. The first two experiments investigated whether the prosodic structures with which young children hear moderately complex syntactic structures influences how frequently young children produce these syntactic structures themselves. The third experiment tested the comprehension of contrastive accentuation in native-German learners of English in both languages. The results will be discussed with respect to the paradoxical results mentioned above.