

Investigating Early Language Acquisition in Mandarin-Learning Toddlers

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Early language acquisition research raises many intriguing questions such as whether children have abstract knowledge of language early in development and what factors determine the acquisition of abstract knowledge. In this talk, we report findings from experimental studies of early language acquisition by Mandarin-learning toddlers using the Intermodal Preferential Looking Paradigm (IPLP) and the Visual Fixation Paradigm. We will show that toddlers are sensitive to the agreement relation between two elements in the sentence (e.g. the semantic agreement between classifiers and nouns) and this sensitivity facilitates on-line sentence processing. We will also demonstrate that toddlers are aware of the subtle differences between verbs types (e.g. the unaccusative-unergative distinction) and that syntactic as well as semantic cues in the input will lead to successful learning of novel verbs of different types. These findings will be discussed with respect to their implications for the initial state of language acquisition and the role of input in language acquisition.