About the Presenter:

Professor Grinstead received his PhD in 1998 from UCLA where he wrote his thesis on the syntactic development of child Spanish-speakers in Los Angeles and child Catalan speakers in Barcelona, with a focus on negation, subjects and imperatives. In more recent work, he has also written on developmental semantics and pragmatics in child Spanish and English, including work on existential quantifiers and pragmatic implicatures associated with them. He has also carried out studies of the syntactic and semantic knowledge of child Spanish-speakers with specific language impairment (SLI), with Blanca Flores, of the Instituto Nacional de Comunicación Humana, among others. Professor Grinstead teaches courses in Spanish linguistics and psycholinguistics in the Hispanic Linguistics graduate program in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the Ohio State University. He recent edited Hispanic Child Languages: Typical and Atypical Development, with John Benjamins, and is Associate Editor of Language Acquisition: A Journal of Developmental Linguistics.

Topic:

We investigate the scope of the specific language impairment (SLI) deficit and whether it is limited to morph syntax or whether it extends to semantics. While some research into typically-developing (TD) children’s temporal interpretations of adult tense morphology shows that children assign adult-like absolute tense values (e.g. Weist 1991), other studies show that children initially use grammatical tense morphology on verbs to mark lexical aspect and not tense (e.g. Bloom, Lifter & Hafitz 1980). Recent rethinking of this earlier work has found that children seem to comprehend absolute tense values when experimental conditions are sufficiently constrained, but nonetheless show a bias towards conflating tense and lexical aspect, as do adults – possibly for information processing reasons (Wagner 2001). While this debate addresses the nature of TD children’s grammatical tense representations, it is equally relevant to the nature of the grammatical tense representations of children with SLI, who have been demonstrated to show severe deficits in grammatical tense (e.g. Rice & Wexler 1996). In particular, we ask whether the tense deficit in SLI is restricted to morph syntax or whether it extends to temporal semantic representations. This question has not been studied using comprehension tasks. In a production study, Leonard et al (2007) show that child English speakers with SLI were less likely than age
and language controls to use verbs marked with –ed to express predicates with perfective lexical aspect and to use verbs marked with –ing to express predicates with ongoing lexical aspect. Using a comprehension test, we tested monolingual child Spanish-speakers’ (n=53) interpretations of past (perfective), present (ongoing) and future (irrealis) tense/aspect morphology with respect to lexical aspect (telicity). 33 of our children were typically-developing (mean age = 3;9) and 20 were diagnosed with SLI (mean age=5;7). Both the Spanish-speaking TD and SLI children in our study showed adult-like interpretations of tense morphology above the level of chance (p < .001). Further, the TD group was not significantly better than the SLI group at matching images depicting tense interpretations with sentences bearing corresponding verb morphology (t=.351, df=51, p=.556). However, the ways in which each group appeared to be making these decisions differed. Paired sample t-tests showed that, for images depicting past-completed actions, TD children were significantly more likely to choose the correct (adult-like) morphology if the predicate was telic than if it was atelic (t= 2.174, df=32, p=.037.) Conversely, with images suggesting a present-ongoing morphology, they were significantly more likely to choose the adult interpretation with atelic predicates (t= 2.782, df=32, p=.009.) For SLI children, the corresponding mean differences for telic versus atelic predicates were not significant for images requiring a past-completed morphology (t= 1.756, df=19, p=.095) or for those requiring a present-ongoing morphology (t= 1.314, df=19, p=.204). In summary, while Spanish-speaking children with SLI may display adult-like temporal-aspectual interpretations, inasmuch as they are able to match tense and aspect morphology to corresponding images, they do not appear to take advantage of telicity to aid them in this task as do typically-developing child Spanish-speakers. These results suggest that SLI is a deficit not only of the morphology and syntax of tense, but also of its semantics.


