

The production-comprehension (a)symmetry in the acquisition of prosodic focus-marking

Aoju Chen

Utrecht University & Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

A common pattern in language acquisition is that comprehension precedes production. There are however aspects of language which are characterised by production-precedes-comprehension asymmetries. The acquisition of sentence-level prosody (or: intonation) is claimed to be a case in point. A most widely discussed phenomenon is the mapping between accentuation and focus (i.e. new information in a sentence). The literature on the acquisition of the focus-to-accentuation mapping over the past two decades has been dominated by the claim that children can use accentuation to mark focus before they can interpret or efficiently use the focus-to-accentuation in comprehension. In this talk, I will show that the alleged asymmetry arises from asymmetries in the test materials used in previous production and comprehension studies, and argue that production and comprehension are symmetrical in the acquisition of prosodic focus-marking in the light of new evidence from production and comprehension studies on a large group of Dutch 4- to 5-year-olds. In addition, I will discuss individual variation in the production-comprehension (a)symmetry and its implications for the dependence of production and comprehension in prosodic development.