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The roles of prototype constructions in early language development

Children's early mastery of linguistic constructions is often imperfect. In particular, recent studies show that they sometimes acquire the prototypical form of a construction quite early but have trouble with less prototypical forms. For example, young German children are skillful with the basic transitive construction when the subject is before the object and case marking is present and diagnostic. But they struggle with all other forms of this construction, especially when case marking and word order compete, as in object-first sentences. In addition, both English and German children initially have great difficulties with relative clauses other than subject-relatives, and in sentence repetition experiments they tend to assimilate other types of relative clauses to these (even though this involves very different operations in the two languages). These results suggest that certain constructions - perhaps based on redundant marking and high cue validities - may be considered prototypical for young language learners in particular languages, and these may play a special role in early development.