Starting Big - The role of multi-word phrases in language learning and processing

Why are children better language learners, despite being worse at other cognitive tasks? Previous accounts have focused on biological, cognitive or neural differences between children and adults. Here, I focus instead on the linguistic units speakers learn from and how those shape the construction of grammar. I argue that children are better at some aspects of language learning because they start off attending to larger sequences of language (e.g. 'I don't know') in addition to words; that these sequences facilitate grammatical and lexical learning; and that reliance on them persists in adulthood. I suggest that language learning in adults might improve if they were encouraged to store and attend to sequences like children do. I explore three concrete predictions of this hypothesis 1) that children's single word production is facilitated in frequent sentence-frames, 2) that adults attend to the frequency of multi-word phrases, and 3) that L2 learning of grammatical gender will improve when learners are first exposed to larger chunks of language. I test these predictions using several experimental tasks: corpus studies of natural speech, elicited production, lexical decision, and artificial language learning.

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