

PROSODIC EFFECTS ON THE ACQUISITION OF GRAMMATICAL MORPHEMES

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Researchers have long observed that children's early use of grammatical morphemes is highly variable. It is generally thought that this is due to incomplete syntactic or semantic representations. However, recent crosslinguistic research has found that the variable production of grammatical morphemes, such as articles and verbal inflections, is phonologically conditioned. Thus, children are more likely to produce (and perceive) grammatical morphemes in simple phonological contexts compared to those that are more complex. This suggests that some of the variability in children's perception and production of grammatical morphemes may be due to phonological context effects, and that some aspects of children's syntactic/semantic representations may be in place earlier than often assumed. This raises important theoretical and methodological issues for investigating syntactic knowledge in L1 acquisition, but also in bilinguals, L2 children and adults, and those with language impairment. Implications for understanding the mechanisms underlying language processing, and the nature of grammatical representations, are discussed.