

A clog in comprehension? A study of the impact of syntax on children's sentence comprehension

DITTE GRANDJEAN & MADSE POULSEN

The present article describes the results of two connected studies of oral sentence comprehension in 56 Danish students from 5th grade. In study 1, we investigated whether the students had difficulty extracting literal meaning from syntactic constructions that have been suspected to cause difficulty, e.g. passives. The sentences were presented to the children without supportive textual or situational context to isolate the ability to extract information from syntax. We compared three sentence construction pairs: Actives vs. passives, pre-modified nouns vs. embedded relative clauses, and subject vs. object relative clauses. As predicted, the students had significantly less precise comprehension of the suspected difficult constructions: Passives, embedded relative clauses and object relative clauses. In addition, the students were significantly slower to respond correctly to passives and embedded relative clauses.

In study 2, we found that variation in oral sentence comprehension accounted for significant variation in the children's reading comprehension after controlling for vocabulary or short-term memory. Together, study 1 and 2 suggests that certain types of sentence constructions may cause sentence and text comprehension difficulties if the constructions convey information that is not made redundant by context.