

One syllable, two points of view

– Danish children's acquisition of dialogic particles

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Children's understanding of others as mental beings with feelings and beliefs develops radically during early childhood, and studies in the ontogeny of complement-clause constructions (e.g. Brandt et al. 2010) and evidential affixes (Choi 2006) show that children also begin to acquire linguistic tools for communicating about these perspectives early in their development. However, it is less well known how children acquire viewpoint constructions that are less salient in their input than complement-clause constructions and evidential affixes, i.e. how motivated children are to look for interpersonal meanings without strong linguistic cues.

Danish dialogic particles are optional, stressless, utterance-medial monosyllables specifying how interlocutors' understandings converge and differ (Davidsen-Nielsen 1996). Through a spontaneous-speech analysis of a kindergarten corpus (94 hours, 16 children: 1;10-3;8 to 4;6-6;3 years), I here show that Danish preschoolers begin to use these inconspicuous particles in group interactions during their fourth year of life, and that they develop a nuanced repertoire during the following two years. This is a strong indicator of children's stable monitoring of perspectives and their motivation to generalize over situations with common perspectival traits – even in the absence of salient linguistic cues.