The acquisition of syntactically encoded evidentiality

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Most research on the acquisition of evidentiality looks at languages such as Turkish, Korean and Tibetan in which evidentiality is encoded in aspect/tense morphemes or embedding verbs in (Aksu-Koç et al. 2009; de Villiers et al. 2009; Papafragou et al. 2007; Ozturk & Papafragou 2008). In English, evidentiality is syntactically encoded in copy-raising constructions, which we refer to here as ‘perception verb similatives’ (PVSs); PVSs with raised subjects (e.g. John looks like he is sick) can only be felicitously uttered by a speaker with direct evidence for the proposition (e.g. speaker sees John; he looks tired and feverish), while unraised PVSs (e.g. It looks like John is sick) are consistent with the speaker having either direct or indirect evidence (e.g. speaker sees John’s doctor’s note).

In this talk, we examine the acquisition of evidentiality in English-speaking children ages 2 to 7 through their spontaneous production of PVSs. Our study is based on an exhaustive examination of 45 corpora in the Childes database (McWhinney & Snow 1985). We show that children as young as two are adult-like in their ability to correlate the syntax of these constructions with the type of evidence they have. Additionally, we present the results of an online adult felicity judgment experiment and an adult production study (Childes) against which the acquisition results are evaluated. Our results bear on questions concerning the syntax-semantics interface in acquisition, as well as on claims concerning the relation of linguistic and conceptual developmental, more broadly