The acquisition of verb compounding in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

Seeing someone breaking a stick into two, an English speaker typically describes with a verb *break*, but a Mandarin speaker has to say *bai1-duan4* ‘bend-be.broken’, a verb compound composed of two free verbs with each verb encoding one aspect of the breaking event. Verb compounding represents a typical and productive way to describe events of motion (e.g., *zou3-chu1* ‘walk-exit’), and state change (e.g., *bai1-duan4* ‘bend-be.broken’), the most common types of events that children of all languages are exposed to from an early age. Since languages vary in how events are linguistically encoded and categorized, the development of verb compounding provides a window to investigate the acquisition of form and meaning mapping for highly productive but constrained constructions and the interaction between children’s linguistic development and cognitive development. The theoretical analysis of verb compounds has been one of the central issues in Chinese linguistics, but the acquisition of this grammatical system has never been systematically studied. This dissertation constitutes the first in-depth study of this topic. It analyzes speech data from two longitudinal corpora as well as the data collected from five experiments on production and comprehension of verb compounds from children in P. R. China. It provides a description of the developmental process and unravels the complex learning tasks from the perspective of language production, comprehension, event categorization, and the interface of semantics and syntax. In showing how first-language learners acquire the Mandarin-specific way of representing and encoding causal events and motion events, this study has significance both for studies of language acquisition and for studies of cognition and event construal.