

UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Abstract Auxiliary BE Representation in Two-year-old Children: Evidence from Syntactic Priming

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n40x6sj>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 31(31)

ISSN

1069-7977

Authors

Landau, Barbara
Legendre, Geraldine
Rissman, Lilia

Publication Date

2009

Peer reviewed

Abstract Auxiliary BE Representation in Two-year-old Children: Evidence from Syntactic Priming

Lilia Rissman

Johns Hopkins University

Geraldine Legendre

Johns Hopkins University

Barbara Landau

Johns Hopkins University

Abstract: Competing theories of syntactic development attribute to the child differing levels of abstract knowledge, from adult-like representations to low-scope lexically-dependent schemata. We conducted a syntactic priming study to investigate whether two-year-old children possess abstract knowledge of the English auxiliary BE category. Children sometimes omit the auxiliary in spontaneous speech, and if children produce more auxiliaries after exposure to categorical as well as lexical priming, they may possess an abstract auxiliary BE category. 15 English-speaking children (2;2-3;0, M=2;8) listened to an experimenter describe two videos using sentences like the girl is swinging or the dogs are running, and were then asked to describe a novel scene. Relative to baseline, production of both auxiliary is and are increased after both lexical primes (e.g. prime = is, target = is) and within-category primes (e.g. prime = is, target = are). This result suggests that children possess abstract syntactic knowledge at an earlier age than some have claimed.