

Sentence comprehension abilities of German-speaking children with Specific Language Impairment and children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Evidence from the development of case and number marking

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Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and at least some children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have demonstrated difficulty with the comprehension of non-canonical sentences that are derived via object movement. In German, the comprehension of case marking and number agreement is essential in order to distinguish non-canonical sentences, for example, object-verb-subject (OVS) sentences, from their canonical counterpart, subject-verb-object (SVO) sentences. According to the predictions of the structural intervention account (Belletti, Friedmann, Brunato, & Rizzi, 2012), number agreement in German should enhance children's comprehension accuracy despite potential difficulty with the interpretation of case marking (Adani, Stegenwallner-Schütz, & Niesel, 2017; Stegenwallner-Schütz & Adani, 2017). In this talk, I will present a study that addresses the overarching question of whether the ability to comprehend the two morphological markers is differently affected by the presence of developmental language disorder in a way that despite difficulty with case marking, number agreement may actually be helpful.

The study examines German-speaking children with SLI and children and adolescents with ASD, and two control groups of age-matched typically developing children, on their auditory sentence comprehension skills for overtly case-marked SVO and OVS sentences. The sentences, that are part of the word order subtest of the *Test zum Satzverstehen von Kindern* (TSVK; Siegmüller, Kauschke, van Minnen, & Bittner, 2011), were manipulated with respect to the number properties of the subject and object (i.e., one plural, one singular) and the number agreement of the verb.

The group of children with SLI and a subgroup of the children and adolescents with ASD, namely those with concomitant language impairment, that was identified using the same criteria and standardized tests as for the SLI group, demonstrated poorer comprehension accuracy in comparison to age-matched controls. The children with SLI comprehended OVS sentences in which number agreement (with plural subject and verb) indicated the non-canonical word order more accurately than OVS sentences with two singular NPs, and therein did not differ from controls. A number facilitation was not attested for children with ASD.

This study shows that that number agreement, in particular plural features of the subject and verb, can help children with and without Specific Language Impairment to alleviate their difficulties interpreting overt case-marking and enhance the comprehension of non-canonical sentences. In conclusion, the ability to interpret case marking and number agreement on the sentence level can be distinctively affected by the presence of developmental language disorders and therefore warrant distinct consideration for the identification and potentially also for the remediation of language impairment among children with SLI and children with ASD.

References

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