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Mandarin-Speaking Children’s Acquisition of Resultative Verb Compounds: Compositionality and Eventuality

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Abstract

Mandarin Resultative Verb Compounds (RVCs, e.g., bo-kai “peel-open”) consist of two verbal components. The second component (V2) denotes a resultant state associated with the action denoted by the first component (V1) (Tham, 2015). RVCs emerge in child speech by age 2 and become productive at age 3 (Deng, 2010). However, comprehension difficulties persist until age 6 (e.g., Chen, 2016). Given the puzzling gap between early production and delayed comprehension, we conducted an event description and a sentence comprehension experiment to investigate children’s knowledge of the compositional nature and resultative meaning of RVCs. In both experiments, we highlighted the contrast between realized and unrealized resultant state in the visual stimuli. 4- and 5-year-olds were sensitive to the result component of RVCs and differentiated RVCs from mono-morphemic V1s. Our findings demonstrate Mandarin-speaking children’s ability to map appropriate verb forms onto unfolding events and provide evidence in favor of continuity in language development.