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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 39(0)

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Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed

Case Markers Facilitate Abstraction of Syntax among Mandarin-speaking preschoolers

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Abstract: In light of the studies that investigate when and how English-speaking young children exhibit adult-like abstraction of syntax, this study explores these issues by examining Mandarin-speaking preschoolers ranging from 2- to 5-year-olds' comprehension of the Mandarin SVO-, ba-, long-passive, and short-passive constructions using the forced-choice pointing paradigm. The results indicated that at the age of 2, Mandarin preschoolers exhibited abstraction of syntax in these four constructions. These results went against the predictions of accounts derived from the structure mapping account and from the competition model. Instead, Mandarin ba- (used in the ba-construction) and bei-markers (used in the long- and short-passive constructions) play an important role in Mandarin-speaking young children's demonstrations of abstraction of syntax.