

Mimetics as the argument-structure sprouts in child Japanese

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Studies on the acquisition of mimetics have almost exclusively focused on their “marked” aspects, including iconicity and characteristic morphophonology. Among the important findings is the facilitatory role of the sound symbolism (i.e., marked semiotics) of mimetics in the acquisition of verb semantics. (See, for example, Imai, Kita, Nagumo & Okada 2008, Kantartz, Imai & Kita 2011.)

In this paper, we present evidence and argue for the hypothesis that the acquisition of the syntax of mimetic verbs proceeds in parallel with that of conventional lexical verbs, and the mimetics are the ones that help children bootstrap the argument structure of verbs, in particular, unaccusatives and transitives. The hypothesis implies that the lexical semantic properties upon which the meaning and argument structure of a mimetic verb is built is not different from those of a conventional lexical verb, for example, as proposed in Kageyama 2007. Then, as far as syntax and semantics are concerned, there is no discrepancy between mimetic verbs and conventional lexical verbs, and no learnability issue arises in the process of the acquisition of verbs.