

A theoretical and experimental study of children's acquisition of recursive relative clauses

Caimei Yang*; Yafei Hu; Bing Bai; Xin Dong & Jiabao Fan (Soochow University)

College of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, Suzhou, Jiangsu, China, cmyang@suda.edu.cn

Abstract: Based on decades of generative grammar research, in 2002, Chomsky together with Hauser and Fitch, emphasizes that faculty of language in the narrow sense is recursive and this trait is exclusive to humans. Since then, there has been a lot of theoretical and experimental research on children's acquisition of such recursive structures as recursive possessives and prepositional phrases but only a little research on children's acquisition of recursive clauses. This paper aims at a theoretical and experimental study of children's acquisition of recursive relative clauses. Based on Chomsky (1957, 2005, 2019) and Rohrmeier *et al.* (2014), the paper divides relative clause recursion into tail, nested and mixed recursion. The authors recruited 262 mandarin-speaking children aged 4-10 and 46 adults to conduct a "picture-contrast production" experiment to explore the acquisition of the above three types of recursion. The main findings are as follows: Children acquire the 2-level tail recursive sequence at 6-7 years old, the 2-level mixed recursive sequence at 9, and the 2-level nested recursive sequence at about 11; before acquiring the 2-level recursive sequence, most children use the 1-level recursive sequence to replace it and some children use coordination to replace recursion in production. The results can be explained by the neurolinguistic findings in Fukui (2017) and Friederici & Chomsky (2017).

Keywords: recursive relative clauses, the types of recursion; acquisition