

## Focus Interpretation in Child Mandarin

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Cross-linguistic acquisition studies have shown that some 4- and 5-year-old children interpret sentences with the focus operator in the pre-subject position as in (1) differently from adults in a situation in which a duck is holding a flag and a balloon and a cat is holding a flag. They would reject the sentence by pointing out that the duck is also holding a balloon.

(1) Only the duck is holding a flag.

Paterson et al. (2003; 2005/2006) argue that children fail to process the assertion meaning conveyed the focus operator *only*. Another view holds that children's association of the focus is free (Philip, 1992). Many others argue that children mis-associate the pre-subject focus with the VP (Crain et al., 1994; Yang, 2000, 2001; Notley et al., 2009; Zhou & Crain, 2010). In this case, children interpret (1) as (2).

(2) The duck is only holding a flag.

Taking these accounts into consideration, Hu and Li (2012) designed an experiment and found that children tended to assign the pre-subject focus to the post-verbal objects bearing the informational (natural) focus. In this paper, we present an experimental study investigating Mandarin-speaking children's interpretation of the sentences like the following in order to see if it is informational focus that plays a role in regulating children's interpretation of focus operators.

(3) Zhi-you grandpa BA liba xiu-hao le  
only grandpa BA fence fix ASP  
'Only Grandpa fixed the fence.'

(4) Pijiu zhi bei xiao-xiang he le  
beer only BEI little-elephant drink ASP  
'The beer was drunk only by the little elephant.'

In Chinese, the sentence in (3) is a Ba-construction and the one in (4) is a Bei-construction. The object NPs in both constructions are not in their canonical informational focus positions. The findings are that some 4- and 5-year-old children still associated the focus operator with the preposed objects. This finding seems to indicate that children's focus association might be regulated by their sensitivity to the thematic roles of the arguments rather than the informational focus as we previously assumed (Hu and Li 2012). However, it is also found that their correct response rate of the Bei-constructions is higher than that of the Ba-construction. This indicates that some children still tend to associate the focus operator with the object even when the object has been removed from its canonical object position if the focus operator precedes the object. All this suggests that thematic roles and precedence are the two factors that affect children's

association of focus.

### References

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