

Young German children's early syntactic competence.  
A preferential-looking study.

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Using a preferential-looking methodology with novel verbs, Gertner et al. (2006) found that 21-month-old English children understand the syntactic marking of transitive word order in an abstract, verb-general way. In the current study we tested whether German children of the same age show this same abstract understanding and whether they also display abstract syntactic knowledge when an initial practice phase is left out. We tested 48 21-month-olds in two between-subjects conditions (with [TRAINING] and without [NO-TRAINING] an initial practice phase). Only the group of TRAINING-children performed above chance in the novel verb test trials; the NO-TRAINING-children did not. These findings suggest that the children did not come to the experiment with abstract syntactic knowledge of the type needed to succeed in the test, but rather they had to go through some kind of learning period in which they had some additional linguistic experiences that prepared them for the test.