

Early sensitivity to information structure in Japanese
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Although Japanese is verb-final, postposing of NPs, PPs, etc. does occur in casual speech. Existing studies claim that two of the major functions of post-verbal elements (Tails) are Defocusing and Topic Changes. Defocused Tails, which occur with no prior pause, generally carry Old information. Topic Change Tails, which involve an exact repetition of a pre-verbal element, are New.

I analyzed postposing in 21 adult-to-adult and 21 mother-child (1;8-2;11) conversations. The results show that pause-less, unrepeated Tails (Defocusing) are predominantly Old while repeated ones (Topic Changes) are New in all three corpora (adults, mothers and children). This suggests that although discourse pragmatics is often claimed to develop late, two-year-olds capture the information structure of Defocusing and Topic Changes appropriately. I argue that children's apparent insensitivity to discourse pragmatics observed in some studies may be artifacts of the experimental method.