

What do language learners know about grammatical morphemes?

Virginia Valian

Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center

The papers in this symposium raise a number of important questions, such as: what are the behavioral and brain differences in how first and second language learners approach the acquisition of grammatical morphemes?; to what extent is a learner's morphosyntactic knowledge masked by incomplete representations at other levels?; does continuity characterize development for either first or second language learners? This discussion focuses on the issue of continuity. For first language acquisition, from infancy through age 3, I will conclude that determiners, investigated by Demuth and Fernald, provide good evidence for step-by-step continuity. If determiners are representative of other grammatical morphemes, continuity in first language acquisition has a solid empirical basis. For adult second language acquisition, I will conclude that although continuity is more difficult to detect both behaviorally and neurally, as shown by Osterhout, genuine continuity may be masked by non-linguistic strategies.