The Comprehension of Passives in Mandarin-speaking Children with DLD and Children with HFA-LI

Jiao DU

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

Mandarin passives are complex constructions involving syntactic movement, which can be used to distinguish children with and without language impairment (Armon-Lotem et al. 2016). Children with developmental language disorder (henceforth DLD) and children with high-functioning autism with language impairment (henceforth HFA-LI) are easily misdiagnosed clinically due to their overlapping language and communication deficits. This study first used the digital coloring page task (Pinto & Zuckerman 2019) to investigate the comprehension of long and short actional passives in 15 Mandarin-speaking children with DLD (average age 5;0) and 15 children with HFA-LI (average age 5;4). The results reveal that there is an asymmetry between the comprehension of long and short passives in children with DLD and children with HFA-LI and that the comprehension of passives in children with DLD and children with HFA-LI is severely impaired, which manifests itself as the thematic role reversal error and wrong agents and observers. In line with Edge Feature Underspecification Hypothesis (EFUH) (Yu et al. 2023), we hold that children with DLD and children with HFA-LI are insensitive to the Edge Feature (Topic) of the moved element and phase heads in long passives, which results in the Relativized Minimality (RM) effects, thereby leading to the poor performance in the comprehension of long passives. The Edge Feature Underspecification Hypothesis can capture characteristics of children with DLD and children with HFA-LI in acquiring both English and Mandarin Passives.