

Individual Paper Session 9
Bilingualism and Processing
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Processing complex Nominal phrases: ‘phrasal’ or ‘inter-phrasal’ processing?

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Processability Theory (PT) (Pienemann, 1998) sees SLA falling into six stages. Among these, Stage 2, the categorical stage, is said to require no transfer of grammatical information; Stage 3, the phrasal stage, is said to involve information exchange between items from one ‘conceptual iteration’; and Stage 5, the ‘inter-phrasal’ stage, is said to involve the exchange of information between items from separate iterations. Given this, complex nominal structures all belong to the phrasal stage unless they contain a relative clause; the predicate and arguments of a clause are said to be activated in separate iterations.

This leaves PT poorly equipped to account for the ordered emergence of nominal structures that lack relative clauses, such as is evident in the SLA of Mandarin (Zhang, 2001; Charters, 2004, 2005). Here common nouns collocate with certain property-denoting modifiers before collocating with a modifier *and* the particle DE; locative nouns emerge later, and collocate with another noun before combining with DE; and locative structures that include DE emerge about the same time as nouns with clearly clausal modifiers. What makes this sequence particularly challenging for PT is the fact that the property-denoting modifiers that emerge so early are conventionally classified as a sub-class of verb (Li and Thompson, 1981). This means the earliest modifiers are, potentially, relative clauses, and the earliest and latest emerging nominals should both belong to the same developmental stage: stage 5. This raises questions about the reasons for the separation of these structures in the observed developmental sequence.

A careful analysis of these structures suggests that it is actually hierarchical complexity, and the transfer of grammatical information across increasing *syntactic* distances which accounts for their ordered emergence; the division of utterances into conceptual iterations has less impact on emergence order than standard PT assumes.