Seemingly similar

Subjects and displacement in grammar, processing, and acquisition

The goal of this dissertation is to ascertain the extent to which different types of displacement, as found in raising and unaccusative structures, are problematic in language acquisition. Syntactically, unaccusatives and raising structures share the raising of their surface subject from a lower position up to a higher position. But raising verbs differ from unaccusatives in that raising verbs allow you to talk about realities that differ from your current one. Both subject displacement and the precise interpretational effects raising verbs have might cause trouble in acquisition.

In order to understand the course of acquisition, this dissertation looks at two Dutch raising verbs in particular: schijnen and lijken (both 'seem'). It provides a definition of the evidential semantics of these verbs and looks at the effects of the particular semantics on processing in a self-paced reading experiment. In addition, by looking at processing of different types of intransitive verbs, this dissertation tease apart the effects of thematic role and syntactic structure on processing. To that end, an innovative version of the visual world experiment is used. The results demonstrate that unaccusative structures delay interpretation compared to unergative structures. Furthermore, children from the age of five already distinguish between unaccusatives and unergatives. Apparently, children from that age are already aware of the displaced subject in unaccusative verbs. Raising verbs on the other hand, are acquired at a later point in acquisition. Moreover, depending on the precise interpretational effects, differences in the timing of acquisition occur.