

Saturday 13 September, 12h00-13h00
Agora Room

Reflections on syntactic complexity, through the lens of adolescent language

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This study examines syntactic complexity conceptualised as difficulty experienced by individual language users. It focuses on early adolescence: a stage where core syntax is assumed to be acquired, but there remains an effect of difficulty associated with syntactic complexity. I start by addressing three questions: (1) How is syntactic complexity defined within a generativist perspective? (2) How is it operationalised in language acquisition research? (3) To what extent can the effect of narrow syntax be disentangled from processing effects? I argue that Phase-based complexity (as defined in the Minimalist framework) could help us answer the third question.

The main part of the talk reports on a novel investigation of syntactic complexity effects in young adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged communities in the UK. Performance was assessed across three complementary tasks: sentence repetition (LITMUS SR), narrative production (LITMUS MAIN), and a purpose-designed reading comprehension task (ARCA). Results reveal substantial inter-individual variability across all three tasks, challenging assumptions about homogeneous syntactic competence in this age group.

The analysis focuses on complexity at the clausal level and on the distinction between phasal and non-phasal subordination. I argue that difficulty patterns in sentence repetition primarily reflect processing capacity constraints rather than core syntactic deficits. In narrative production, distribution patterns of clausal subordination are shown to correlate with lexical diversity, morphosyntactic abilities, and reading comprehension abilities. I argue the syntactic complexity of narratives is a manifestation of strategic information management and of the sophistication of discourse representations. The reading comprehension data reveal that while figurative language constitutes a more substantial comprehension barrier than syntactic complexity per se, complex syntactic structures can impede the successful interpretation of non-literal meaning when these factors co-occur.

The findings converge on the conclusion that, at adolescence, syntactic complexity functions as a proxy measure for language-mediated information processing demands. This is consistent with the central tenet of the generative approach, according to which narrow syntax is inherently economical.