

Speaker: **Jodi Reich**
Graduate Student, Yale University

Title: **The acquisition of optional movement by children with SLI: Evidence from the expression of (in)definiteness by Russian-speaking children with SLI**

Date: Friday, September 22, 2006
Time: 12:00pm
Place: Linguistics Seminar Room (201), 370 Temple St

Abstract:

This paper concerns the acquisition of optional movement by children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and investigates the expression of (in)definiteness by monolingual Russian-speaking children with SLI. Previous research on the grammar of children with SLI has led to a variety of accounts for their observed difficulties, including the hypothesis that children with SLI acquire optional movement in place of obligatory movement in the adult target grammars, part of the Representational Deficit for Dependent Relations (e.g. van der Lely 1998, 2003). This type of analysis predicts that optional movement in the target language should be optional or absent from the grammar of children with SLI. The data presented in this talk are not predicted by this type of analysis.

16 children were selected from a medium-sized village in northern Russia, near the border with Finland (population: approximately 900). The majority of residents of this village form a single pedigree structure and the rate of language disorders in this village is higher than expected. The children were split into two groups, those with SLI and those whom are typically developing (TD), based on the use of Mean Length Utterance (MLU), calculations of syntactic complexity, and the conclusions of the specialists working with them. The SLI group consisted of 9 children (mean age: 8;4) and the TD group consisted of 7 children (mean age: 8;2). The non-verbal IQ for each of the children is above 70 on the Universal non-verbal Intelligence Test. The children completed a sentence repetition task with NPs marked overtly for (in)definiteness. Overt markers and word order are both optional, but available methods of expressing (in)definiteness in Russian. The task included 47 grammatical sentences and tested the combination of overtly marked definites and indefinites in preverbal and postverbal positions. When not marked overtly, these pre- and postverbal positions can also be used to mark (in)definiteness. The SLI group made significantly more changes to the sentences than the TD group. The most frequent changes made for both groups were deletion or substitution.

Although the SLI and TD groups were similar in the pattern of their changes, the significantly higher frequency of changes by the SLI group suggests that the expression of (in)definiteness by movement is not optional for these children, as it is in adult Russian. Although the sentences were already grammatically overtly marked for (in)definiteness, the SLI group changed the sentences to work within the word order method of marking (in)definiteness frequently. This result is incompatible with the Representational Deficit for Dependent Relations. An accurate analysis of movement in SLI grammars cannot be generally limited to optional movement and must determine the specific factors influencing the application of movement by children with SLI.

References

van der Lely, H. K. J. (1998). SLI in children: Movement, economy, and deficits in the computational-syntactic system. *Language Acquisition*, 7, 161-192.

van der Lely, H. K. J. and J. Battell. (2003). Wh-movement in children with grammatical SLI: a test of the RDDR Hypothesis. *Language*, 79, 1, 153-181.