

## Introduction to the Special Issue on Specific Language Impairment in Children

Heather K. J. van der Lely

*Department of Psychology  
Birkbeck College  
University of London*

Kenneth Wexler

*Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

The articles in this special issue<sup>1</sup> capture the current broad range of investigations into the linguistic characterization of specific language impairment (SLI) in children. Investigations into children with SLI have increasingly become of interest to theorists of language acquisition. Such investigations can provide a unique window into children's grammar and the biological basis of the language faculty. Furthermore, the application of linguistic and psycholinguistic theory to the study of SLI can provide valuable insight into the underlying nature and cause of the disorder.

Some of the first researchers to apply linguistic and psycholinguistic theory to the study of SLI were Menyuk (1964) and Cromer (1978). Their pioneering work provided a foundation for the symbiotic relation between theories of language acquisition and SLI. Leonard and colleagues (Leonard, Sabbadini, Leonard, and Volterra (1987)) provided the first cross-linguistic investigation of SLI, which was a notable landmark in the field. In addition, Bishop's (1979) early work on grammatical comprehension brought to attention the fact that the grammatical deficit of children with SLI was not merely an expressive problem. Surprisingly,

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Heather K. J. van der Lely, Department of Psychology, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, London, WC1E 7HX, England. E-mail: h.vanderlely@psyc.bbk.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup>Note from the guest editor: The articles underwent a standard anonymous peer review process overseen by me with my own article being overseen by Kenneth Wexler. I thank Kenneth Wexler for his invaluable support and advice with this special issue.

it was not until the 1990s, following Gopnik's (1990) paper, that the value of investigations into SLI for theoretical issues became widely recognized.

It is now known that SLI is a heterogeneous disorder that may vary in linguistic characteristics. The articles in this issue provide a step toward addressing the significance of this variability to research into SLI by providing thorough background details of the subjects and reporting any individual variation in performance in the studies. The linguistic diversity in SLI may provide interesting insight into dissociable aspects of the linguistic system.

The articles in this special issue reflect the increasing body of research on SLI and the broadening investigations of the linguistic characterization of children with SLI. Ingham, Fletcher, Schelletter and Sinka's article investigates resultative verbs using an elicitation task. This study adds to the growing number of investigations that go outside the impairment with inflectional morphology of children with SLI.

The value of the cross-linguistic perspective is evident in the articles on children with SLI speaking French (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut, and Gérard), German (Hamann, Penner, and Lindner), and Italian (Bottari, Cipriani, Chilosi, and Pfanner). Data from these languages enable hypotheses to be tested in ways not possible when considering only one language. Jakubowicz et al. investigate the elicited production and comprehension of determiners and clitic pronouns, the majority of which share the same surface form, in French-speaking children. Hamann et al.'s article explores clause structure in German-speaking individuals from the spontaneous speech from three different cohorts (Clahsen, Penner, and Lindner). Their study includes detailed analysis of verb-second patterns in their German participants, which has been the topic of much debate recently. Bottari et al. investigate a subgroup of Italian children with SLI who are characterized by a high number of omissions or total absence of determiners. The data are discussed in relation to theoretical accounts of the properties of determiner phrases.

Van der Lely's article attempts to provide a unified account for the range of deficits found in a subgroup of participants with Grammatical SLI. In the article she makes the distinction between a linguistic characterization of SLI and explanation for the underlying nature of SLI, *vis-à-vis*, optional movement and a deficit within economy. Wexler, Schütze, and Rice's article on subject case and tense marking brings theoretical issues of language acquisition to central stage. They argue for the optionality of the inflection components agreement and tense in immature grammars.

Goad's article provides a detailed phonological analysis of plural formation in adults with SLI from the large family known as the KE family (Gopnik (1990)). This article makes an important link between prosodic and morphological anomalies. The use of phonological theory brings new insight into the phonological characterization of SLI.

The articles submitted for this special issue were a stimulating set, investigating a broad range of linguistic abilities in children with SLI. The commitment of the authors to pursuing the goal of understanding the nature and cause of SLI and providing insight into language development is evident in this special issue. As guest editor and editor, it is our privilege to introduce these articles that represent the cutting edge of research in this field.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The inspiration for this special issue grew out of the Ehrenburg workshop on children with SLI, January 31 to February 2, 1997. We thank the Wellcome Trust (Grant 004179/Z/95/Z) and the British Academy for their financial support, and Gerhard Kurz and Thomas Schultz-Anschutz for their generosity in making the Ehrenburg available, which provided such a unique setting for the workshop.

### REFERENCES

- Bishop, D. (1979) "Comprehension in Developmental Language Disorders," *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology* 21, 225-238.
- Cromer, R. (1978) "The Basis of Childhood Dysphasia: A Linguistic Approach," In M. Wyke, ed., *Developmental Dysphasia*, Academic Press, London.
- Gopnik, M. (1990) "Feature-Blind Grammar and Dysphasia," *Nature* 344, 715.
- Leonard, L., L. Sabbadini, J. Leonard, and V. Volterra (1987) "Specific Language Impairment in Children: A Cross-Linguistic Study," *Brain & Language* 32, 233-252.
- Menyuk, P. (1964) "Comparisons of Grammar of Children With Functionally Deviant and Normal Speech," *Journal of Speech & Hearing Research* 7, 109-121.