

Scalar Presupposition and the Structure of Alternatives in the Acquisition of *Only*

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In this talk, which is based on joint work with Ayaka Sugawara and Ken Wexler, I will suggest an approach to understand a curious phenomenon concerning the acquisition of *only*. As Crain et al. (1992, 1994) showed, children up to at least age six display a surprisingly robust rate of assigning non-adult interpretations to sentences with pre-subject *only*. For instance, children may judge Kermit's answer in (1a) to the question *Kermit, can you tell me what happened?* as true relative to a scene where a cat is holding a flag, a goose is holding a flag and a balloon, and a frog is holding a balloon. Moreover, when asked why they think Kermit was correct, they offer justifications indicating that they assigned (1a) an interpretation as in (1b).

- (1) a. Only the cat is holding a flag.
- b. The cat is only holding a flag.

These results, replicated since for a number of languages including German, Japanese, and Mandarin, raise a host of questions, two of which I will propose partial answers for: 1. Why are sentences with pre-subject *only* difficult for children to understand? 2. Why is the non-adult interpretation they arrive at the same as the interpretation they assign to a sentences with *only* taking VP scope? The explanation I will attempt is based on two key ingredients: the hypothesis that *only* triggers a scalar presupposition (Klinedinst 2004, etc.) and the hypothesis that focus alternatives are generated by a structure-sensitive algorithm along the lines of Fox&Katzir (2011). I will present results, some still preliminary, from a series of experiments which indicate that the factors identified by the account modulate children's success in interpreting sentences with *only*.