

Comprehension and processing of morphosyntax by adolescents: A scoping review

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Adolescence is a period of substantial cognitive, social, and linguistic development [1], yet it occupies an unclear position in language research. Namely, early childhood is typically studied through a developmental lens [2] and adulthood as a separate, stable stage, leaving adolescence largely overlooked in between. Research on adolescents that does exist tends to use typically developing individuals as controls for studying specific (developmental) disorders, rather than as a focus in their own right [3,4].

Our aim is to present the first scoping review specifically targeting morphosyntactic receptive abilities in typically developing adolescents (aged 12–19). A total of 31 studies, drawn from a larger pool of 1480 reports, met our filtering and selection criteria, covering both morphosyntactic competence and awareness. Findings consistently indicate that the comprehension of core morphosyntactic domains (e.g., compounds, affixation, anaphora, passives, complex sentences) continue to develop throughout adolescence, with many performing below ceiling even at age 15 or older. For example, English adverbial clauses (e.g. *After moving furniture all day, Jeanine...*) as well as adjectival clauses (e.g. *Already late for her interview, Jeanine...*) are difficult to comprehend for 15 y.o.s [5]. However, most studies were not explicitly designed to investigate late acquisition; rather, morphosyntactic measures were typically included as simple predictors of reading and writing skills.

In addition, we found surprising crosslinguistic differences, due either to a real uncharted, difference in the developmental path of these competences between languages, or due to the scarcity of studies and methodological differences. For example, compounds are fully understood by 13 y.o. children in English [6], but not in Chinese children of about the same age [7]; English middle school and high school children are still <70% correct on a grammaticality judgment task involving complex sentences [8], whereas their Spanish-speaking peers are almost at ceiling in a similar task [9].

Notably, a major gap in the literature concerns older adolescents (above 15), for whom little data are available. We conclude that morphosyntactic fine-tuning seems to persist well beyond age 12, and advocate for targeted research into adolescent language development. By isolating morphosyntactic comprehension, we can begin to fill a gap in the literature that has implications for both practice (e.g. in law, education, speech and language therapy) and theoretical models of language acquisition.

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