

# 2019-2020 Humanities Center Brown Bag Series

## What makes us smart: acquisition of clausal structure as a cognitive augmenter

Humans, even in infancy, possess non-verbal means for mental computations that involve reasoning about concrete objects and events directly accessible to sensory experience. These capacities are not unique to our species. However, unlike other species, (adult) humans are also capable of reasoning about “psychologically distant” objects and events (i.e., those beyond direct sensory access). While such reasoning may be possible without language, it would be at best slow, imprecise, and inconsistent. The capacity to reason about psychologically distant objects emerges gradually, but the earliest elements of this ability appear around the same age as the onset of combinatorial language.

I will present an argument for a close link between linguistic and cognitive development using convergent findings from child language acquisition and cognitive development. I will introduce a gradualist theory of the acquisition of clausal structure (Rakhlin & Progovac, 2017) and show how the steps in the development of the layers of the syntactic hierarchy align with (and arguably pave the way for) cognitive milestones documented in developmental research. According to this view, the emergent layers of syntactic structure augment children’s non-verbal representations allowing children to go beyond their innate “core knowledge” systems and non-linguistic processing mechanisms (sensory-perceptual and affective). This expansion provides representational means for representing information about hidden causes, others’ desires and beliefs, distant past (or future) and counterfactual situations.



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**Dr. Natalia Rakhlin** is an Associate Professor of English/Linguistics. She specializes in child language acquisition and developmental language disorders. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Connecticut in 2007 and worked as a research scientist at Yale Child Study Center studying developmental language disorders. She joined the WSU community in 2015. Her research focuses on how specific language impairment, developmental dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorder manifest themselves in diverse languages/cultures.

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