Finiteness in early adult and child L2 German: Evidence from elicited imitation
Sarah Schimke, SFL

There is an ongoing debate about how to best describe the knowledge underlying utterance structure in the production of beginning second language learners: generative approaches to L2 acquisition often assume that learners rapidly acquire a native-like phrase structure, and that target-deviant utterances are performance errors (Prévost and White, 2000). Functional approaches assume that semantic rather than syntactic principles govern early utterance structure (Dimroth et al., 2003). Moreover, some theories assume that the acquisition process is different depending on the age of the second language learner (Meisel, 2009). In this talk, I'm going to present elicited production and imitation data obtained with 48 adult and 19 child second language learners of German. In both tasks, negated sentences were analysed in order to determine the position of the verb with respect to the negator (syntactic finiteness). In addition, the form of the verb (morphological finiteness) was also taken into account. The results suggest that utterance structure is determined by semantic principles at early stages, and that native-like syntactic knowledge is then built up gradually. Data from child and adult learners were strikingly similar, suggesting that both populations go through a similar acquisition process. Child learners seem to pass through the same stages much faster than adult learners, however.