Focus interpretation in Child Hungarian

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- **Research questions**
- Background
- Experiments
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion

Research questions

1. Regarding the exhaustive reading, what are the main differences between the acquisition processes of the following 3 sentence types:

(i) sentences with ***csak*** 'only',

(ii) sentences with **structural focus**,

(iii) **neutral SVO** sentences?

2. How do these results contribute to the semantic discussion concerning the exhaustive interpretation of these constructions?

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Background – *csak* 'only'

Horn (1969): sentences containing focus particles have **two meaning components**

(1) *Only Muriel voted for Hubert.* (Horn 1969: 98)

Assertion: 'No one other than Muriel voted for Hubert' (negative contribution)

Presupposition: 'Muriel voted for Hubert' (positive contribution, prejacent)

Hungarian *csak*: Kenesei (1986), Szabolcsi (1994)

(2) *Csak Péter alszik.* (Kenesei 1986: 134)

Background – structural focus

structural / pre-verbal / identificational focus

- syntactically and prosodically marked

(3) *Péter meg-vette a ház-at.* Ø focus
Peter PRT-bought the house-ACC
'Peter bought the house.'

(4) *A HÁZ-AT vette meg Péter.* Object focus
the house-ACC bought PRT Peter
'It was the house that Peter bought.'

- express **exhaustive identification** (É. Kiss 1998)

Background – structural focus

How does sentences conatining structural focus express this exhaustive meaning?

1. [+**exhaustive**] **semantic featur**e

   Szabolcsi 1981, É. Kiss 1998, among others

2. **presupposition**

   Kenesei 1986, van Leusen & Kálmán 1993, Szabolcsi 1994, Bende-Farkas 2009, É. Kiss 2011

   "The focus-containing utterance *presupposes* rather than *asserts* the uniqueness of its antecedent."

   (van Leusen & Kálmán 1993: 12)

Background – structural focus

3. **implicature**

- conversational implicature

  Wedgwood 2003, 2005; Onea & Beaver 2011

  "The pragmatic tendency to interpret cooperative answers to questions as complete then explains the exhaustivity effects."

  (Onea & Beaver 2011: 358)

- conventional implicature

  Gerőcs, Babarczy & Surányi 2014

Background – Previous experiments

Experiments with adult native speakers

- Onea & Beaver (2011) – yes, and…/yes, but…/no, …
- Gerőcs, Babarczy & Surányi (2014)
  - Experiment 1 – online truth-value judgment task
  - Experiment 2 – offline, indirect task

Acquisition studies:

- Kas & Lukács (2013) – binary yes/no answers
  - Neither 6-year-olds nor 10-year-olds showed any sign of focus sensitivity as a group.
  - Responses of adults were inconsistent too.
- Balázs & Babarczy (2014) – 3-point-scale

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Experiment 1–3

Experiment 1. (sentences with *csak* 'only')

(1) *Csak a nyuszi emelte fel a zászlót.*
only the rabbit raised up the flag-ACC
'Only the rabbit has raised the flag.'

Experiment 2. (sentences with structural focus)

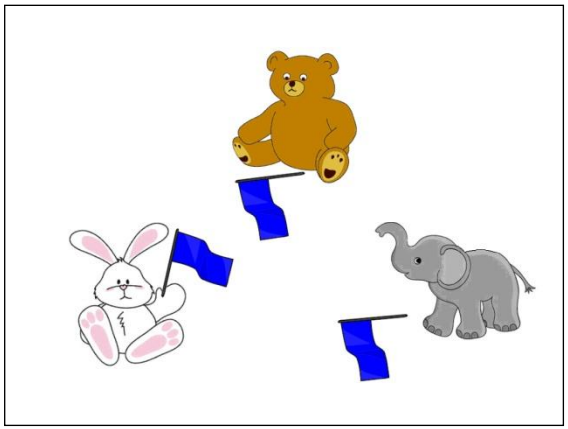
(2) *A NYUSZI emelte fel a zászlót.*
the rabbit raised up the flag-ACC
'It is the rabbit who has raised the flag.'

Experiment 3. (neutral SVO sentences)

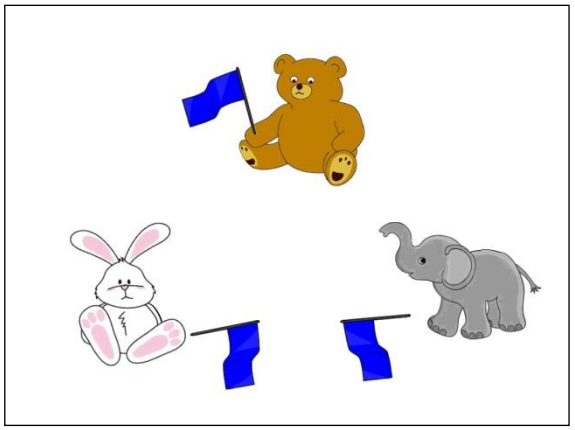
(3) *A nyuszi fel-emelte a zászlót.*
the rabbit up-raised the flag-ACC
'The rabbit has raised the flag.'

Conditions of Experiment 1–3

Control conditions:

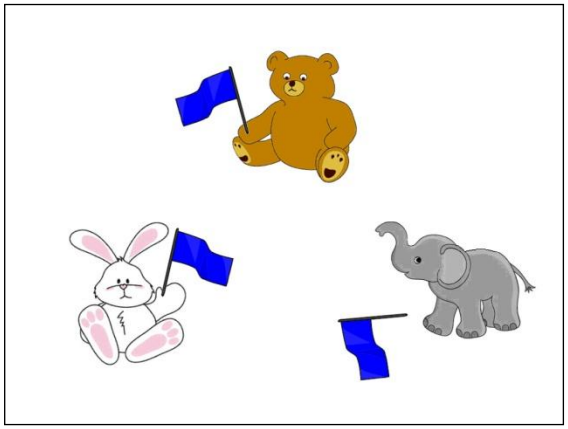


(i) true / exhaustive condition

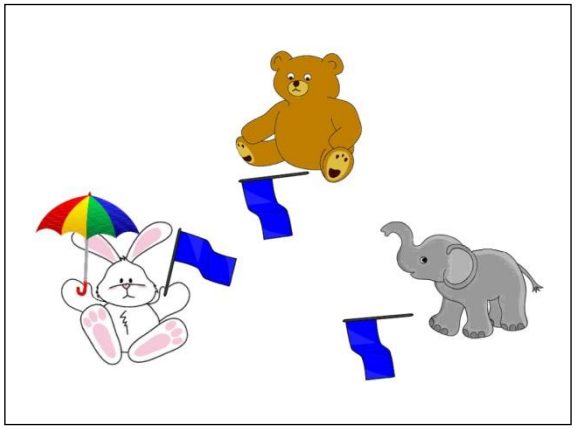


(ii) false condition

Critical conditions:



(iii) non-exhaustive condition



(iv) condition (i) with a distractor

Procedure

Sentence – picture verification task

3-point-scale 

cf. Katsos & Bishop (2011)

Balázs & Babarczy (2014)

4 conditions x 8 items = 32 test sentence-picture pairs

+ 24 filler sentence-picture pairs

- randomized order, SR Research Experiment Builder
- 2 occasions

Procedure

Participants:

4 age groups in each experiment (Experiment 1, 2, 3)

- 15 **preschoolers** (mean ages: 5;9, 6;2 and 6;4)
- 15 **7-year-olds** (mean ages: 7;2, 7;5 and 7;6)
- 15 **9-year olds** (mean ages: 9;3, 9;7 and 9;6)
- 15 **adults** (mean ages: 37;5, 42;7 and 22;10)

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Results of the **adult** control groups in the **non-exhaustive conditions** of Experiment 1–3

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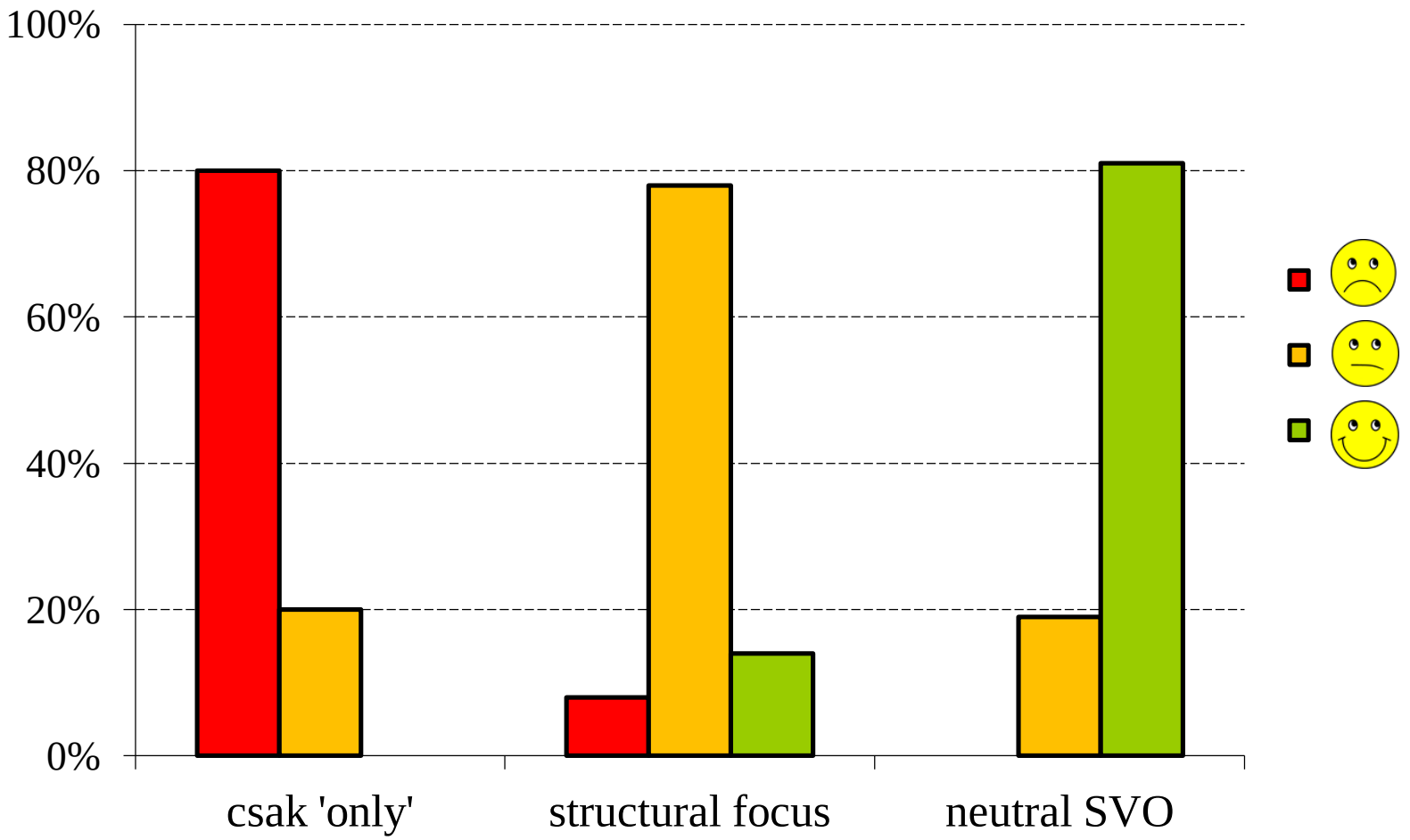
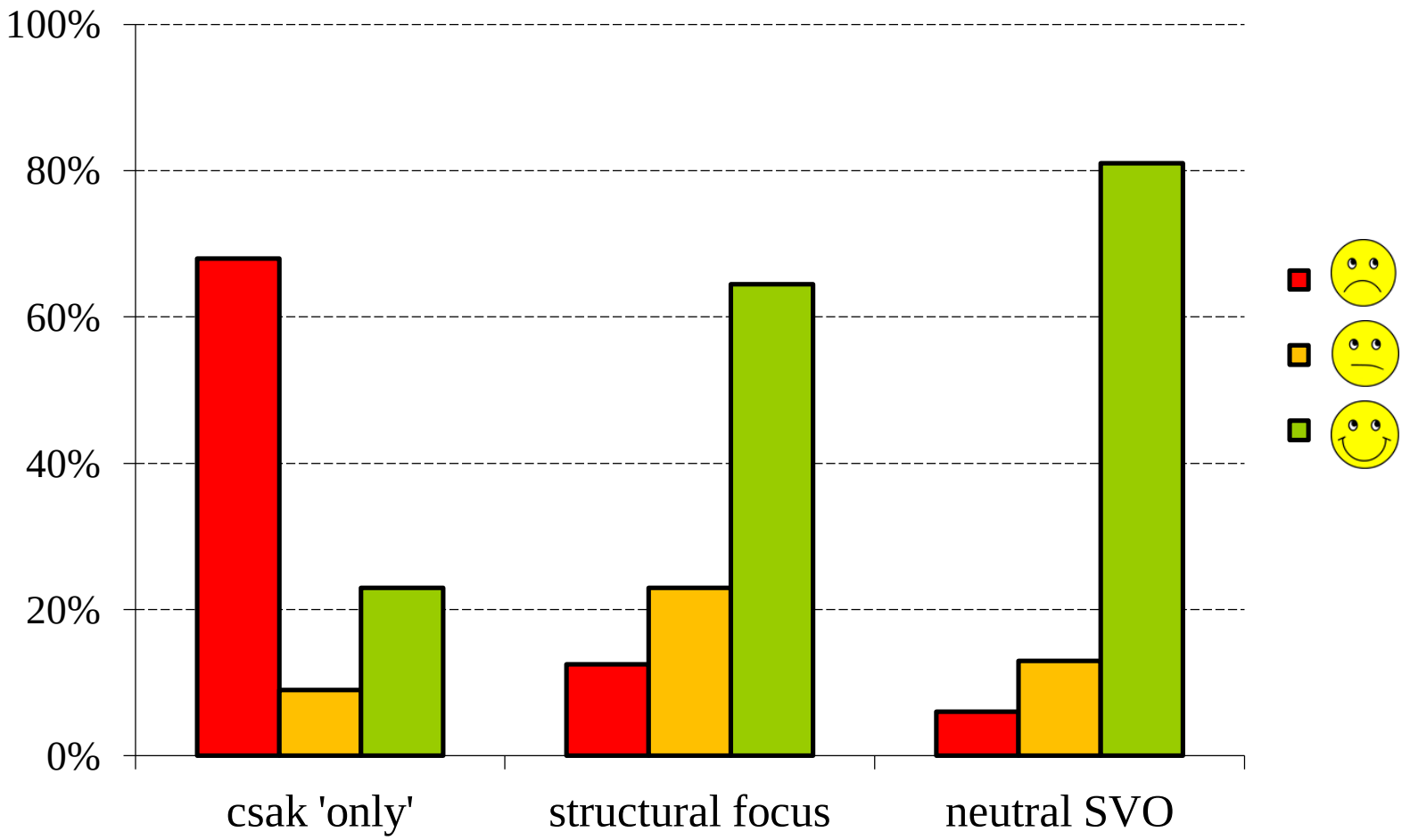
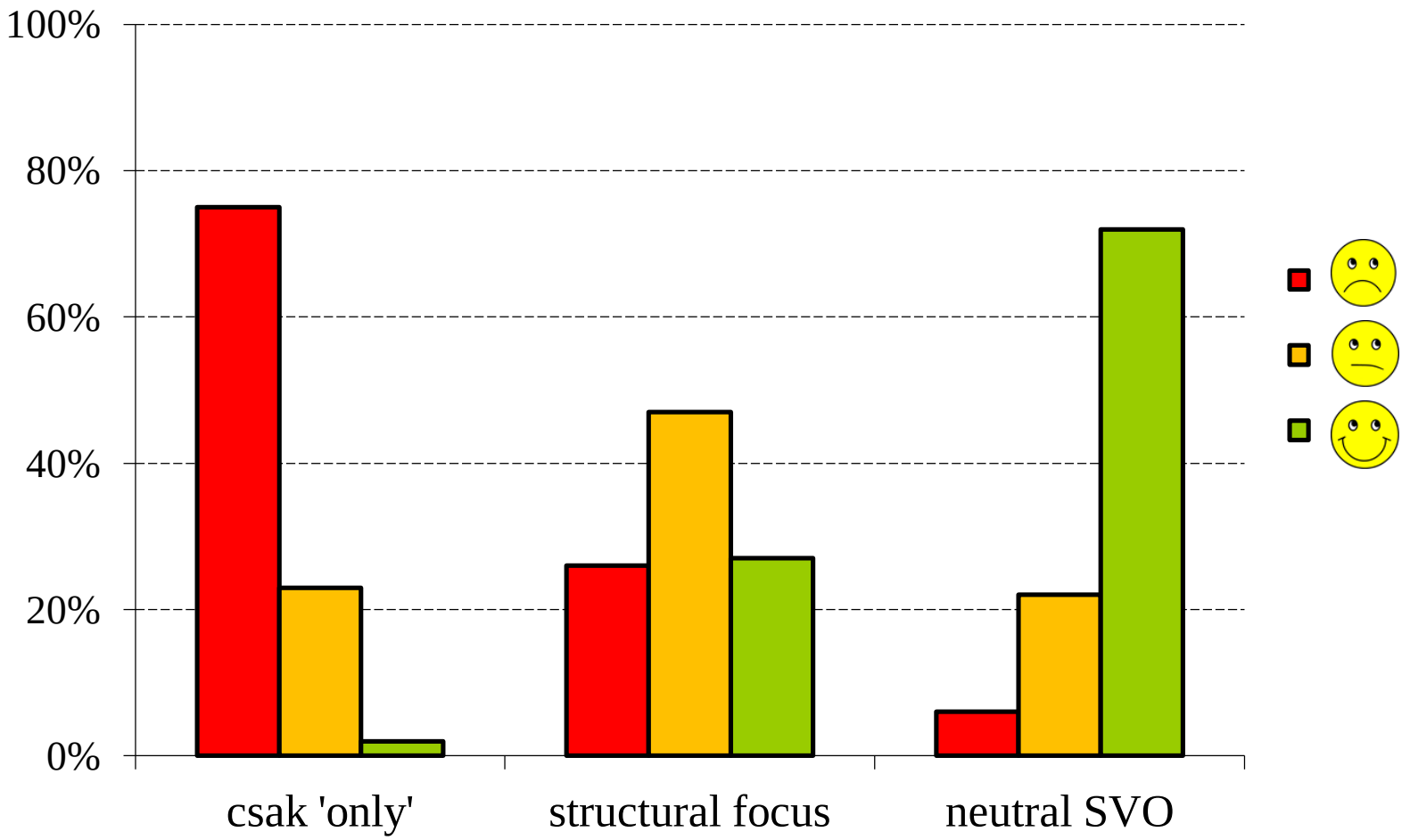


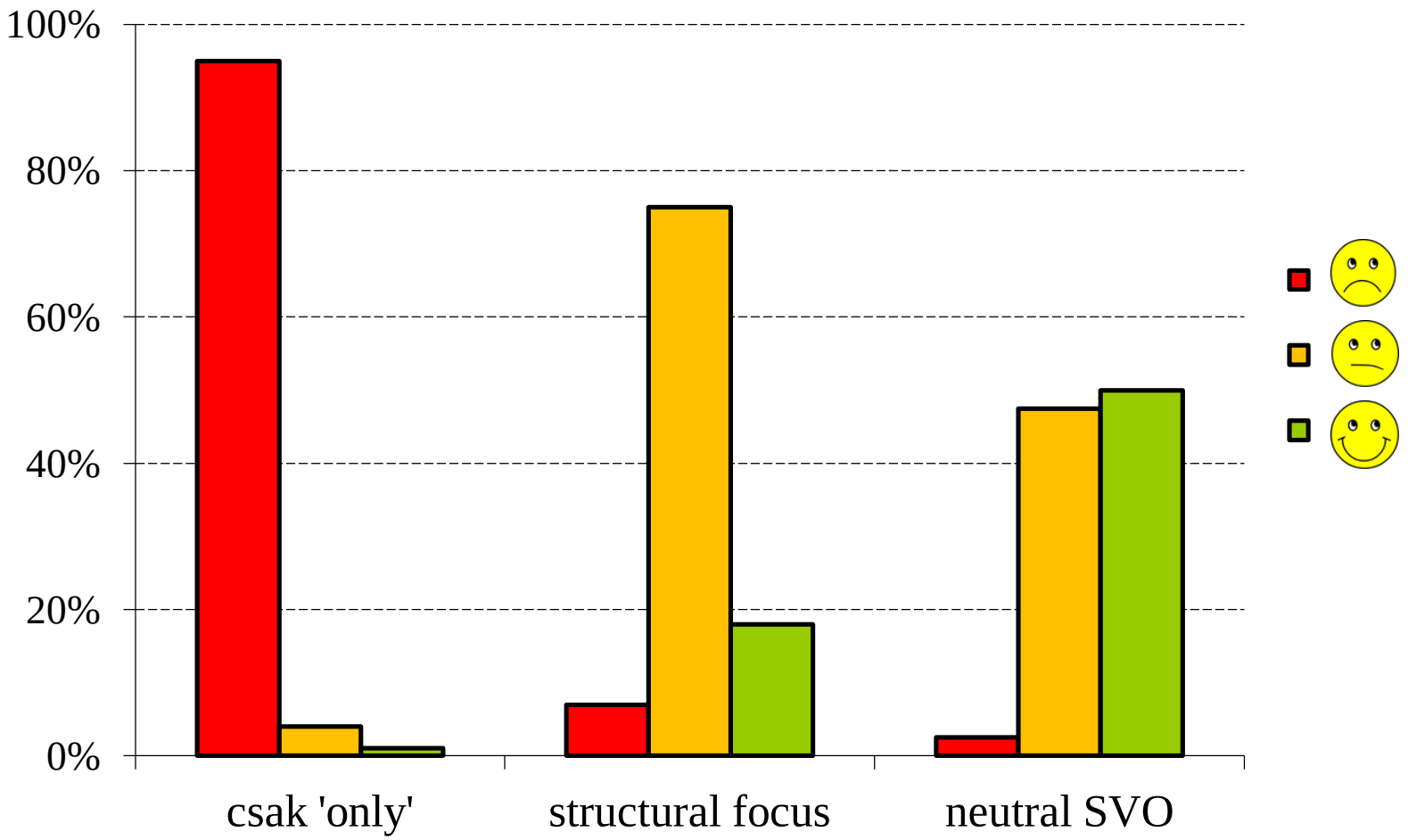
Results of the **preschoolers** in the **non-exhaustive conditions** of Experiment 1–3



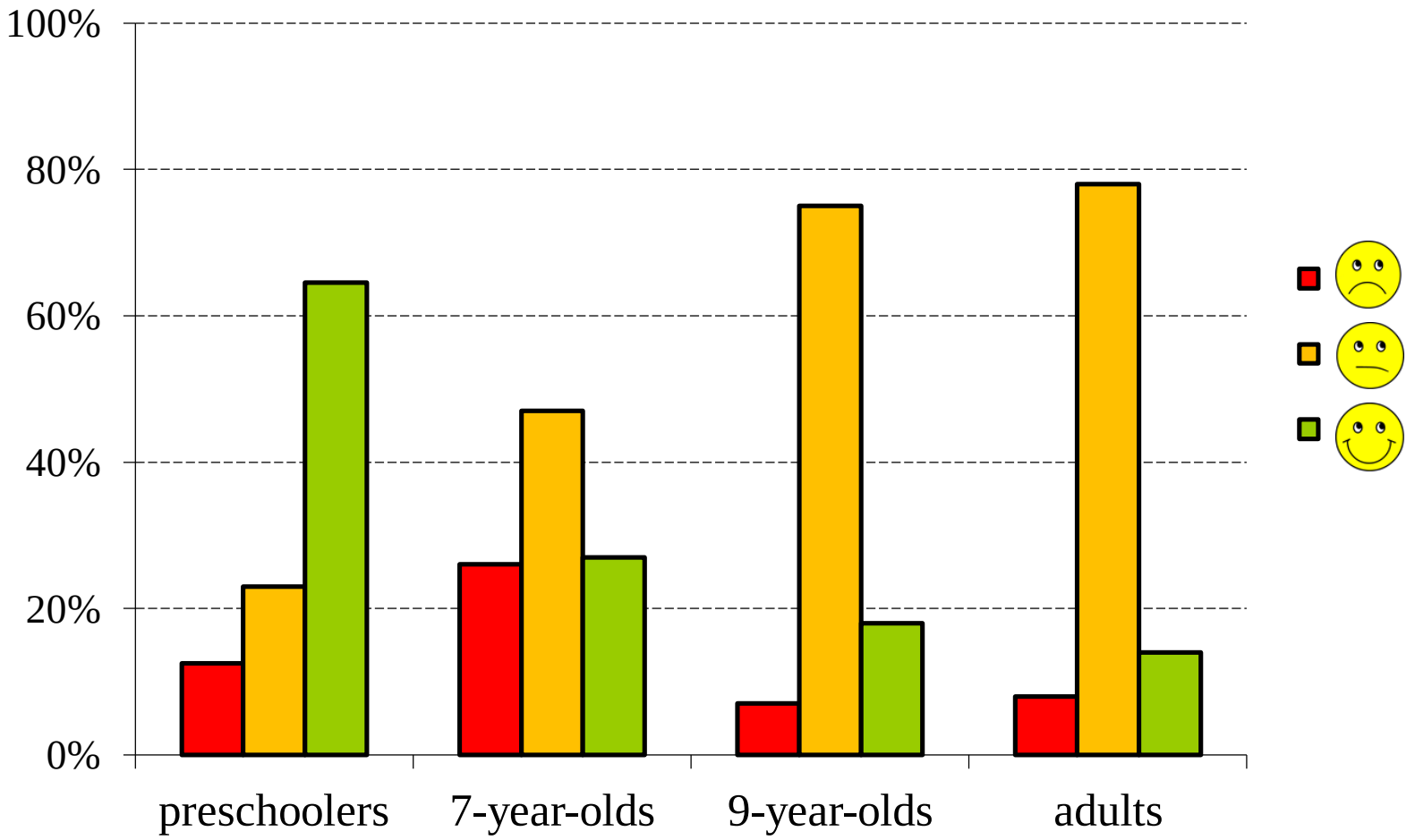
Results of the **7-year-olds** in the **non-exhaustive conditions** of Experiment 1–3



Results of the **9-year-olds** in the **non-exhaustive conditions** of Experiment 1–3



Proportion of responses of the **non-exhaustive condition** of **Experiment 2** (structural focus)



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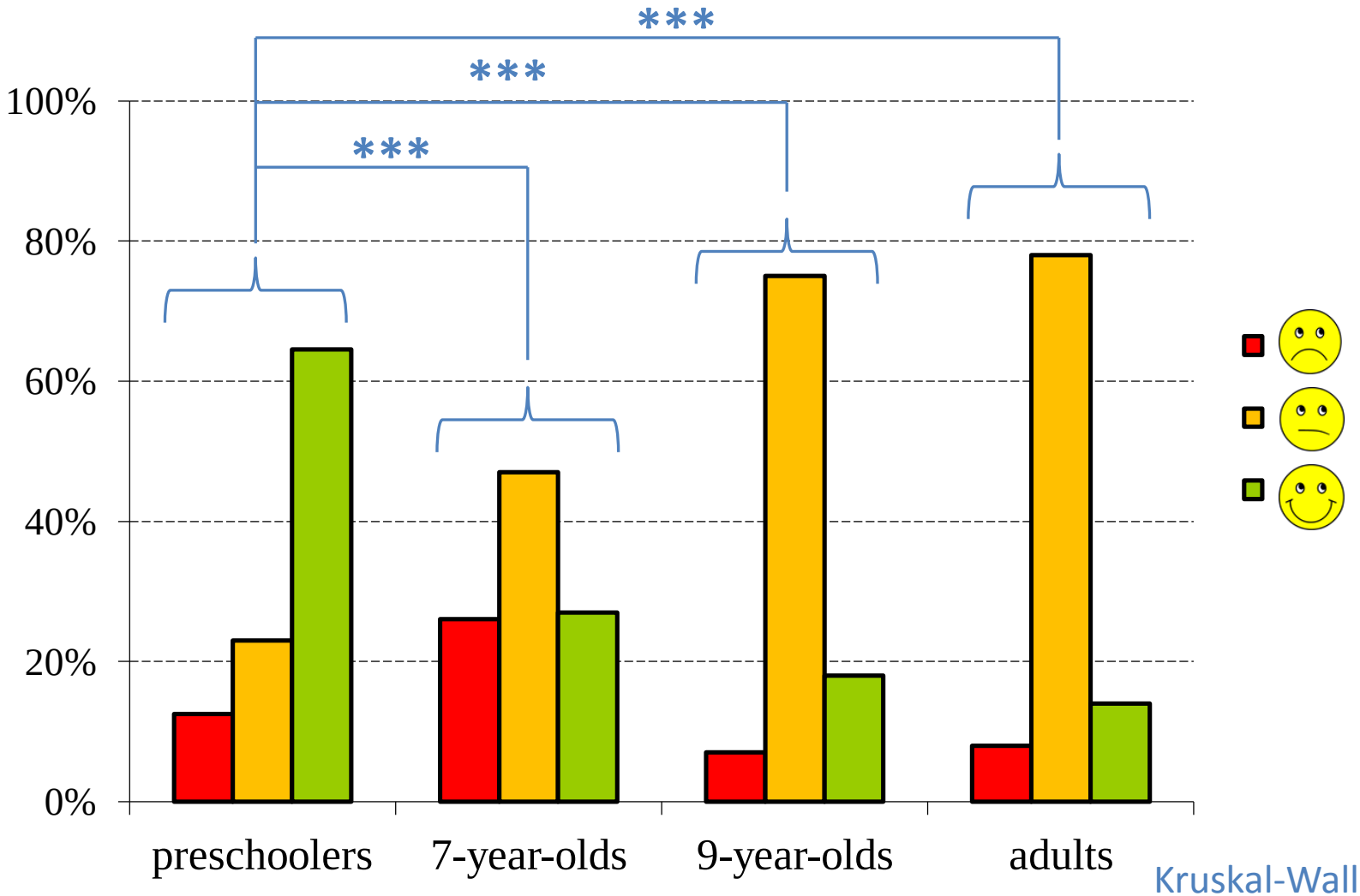
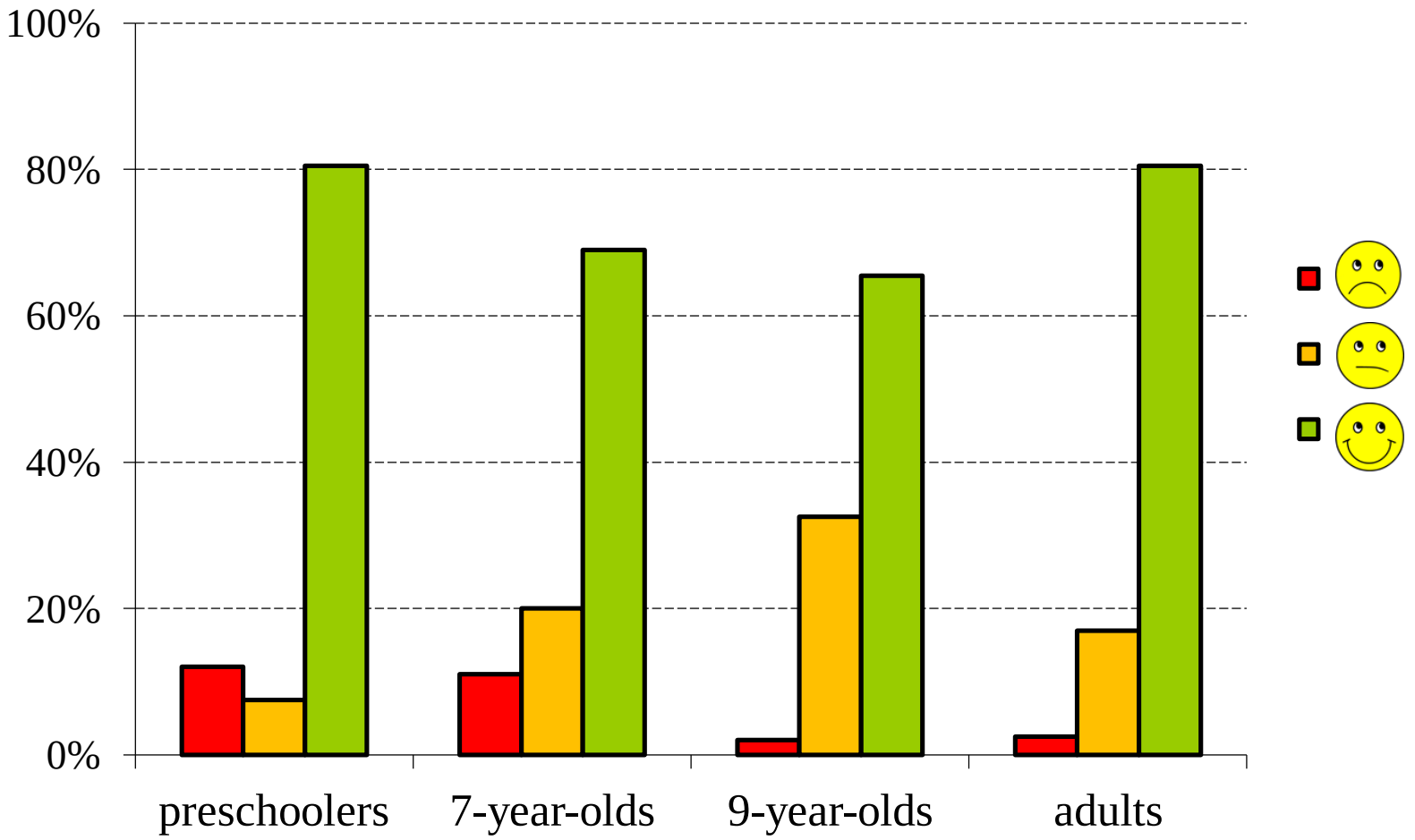


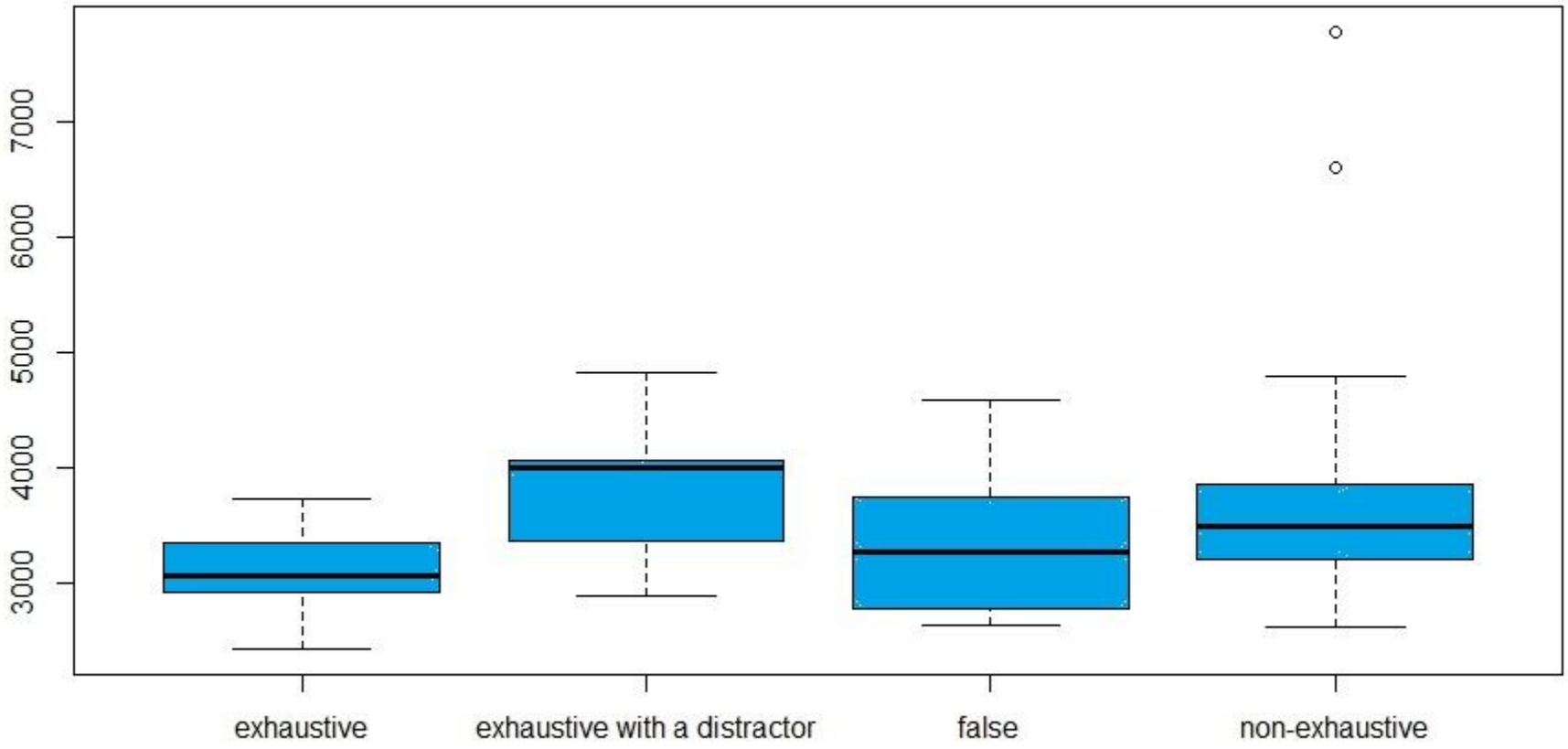
Kruskal-Wallis test

***: $p < 0.001$

Proportion of responses of **true plus distractor condition** of **Experiment 2** (structural focus)



Reaction times of adult participants in **Experiment 2** (structural focus)



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Discussion – Findings

- No difference between the age groups in the interpretation of csak 'only'.
- In the case of neutral SVO sentences, only 9-year-olds differed from other age groups.

- In the case of structural focus, there is an **increase of exhaustive interpretation with age**.

  → Exhaustivity encoded by a specific syntactic configuration is harder for children to process.

Discussion – The exhaustivity issue

What type of meaning is the exhaustive meaning of structural focus?

- **At-issue meanings** can be ruled out, because of the differences between Experiment 1 and 2. (structural focus vs. *csak* 'only')
- **Context dependent meanings** (conversational implicatures and conversationally-triggered presuppositions) can be excluded, because of the differences between Experiment 1 and 3. (structural focus vs. neutral SVO)

Discussion – The exhaustivity issue

- **Conventional implicature or presupposition?**

  Potts (2005):

  - CIs are speaker-oriented entailments which are independent of the at-issue entailments.
  - CPs are speaker-oriented, backgrounded meanings that are **not easily altered by contextual factors**.

  Exhaustivity of English cleft constructions was claimed to be a **conventional presupposition**. (Karttunen 1974, Gazdar 1979, Büring and Križ 2013)

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Conclusions

Experimental data support the view that there are 3 different kinds of exhaustivity in the 3 discussed constructions.

- Csak – **assertion**
- Structural focus – **conventional presupposition**
- Neutral SVO sentences can also be interpreted exhaustively, however, this is only a **pragmatic implicature** arising in certain contexts.

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Thank you for your attention!

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