

Marking the differences:

What precursor skills to reading comprehension tell us

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In this conceptual paper I reflect on two issues: a framework for assessing skills that contribute to early reading comprehension and the challenge of communicating their inherent variety. First, for an assessment framework that encompasses influential component skills to reading comprehension, attention to language-particulars must drive the effort, not what we know as the language-universals. I will demonstrate the reasons to mark the differences using the orthographic, phonological and morphological features found in the Bantu, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and Semitic language families. The essential infrastructure for implementation of such as assessment framework is an item bank that reflects the corpus statistics of child-directed print corpora. Second, for the communication challenge, I will argue that traditional taxonomy around proto-languages hide more than they reveal about what it takes to acquire the precursor skills for reading comprehension. What is needed instead is a language grouping that captures distinctly varied learning demands. Here, the learning is specific to different tiers of the linguistic input and the demand is due to the complexity, consistency, predictability and similar other properties of the script and language. These properties shape representation and processing and are linked to the architectures of symbol sets, the sound-to-symbol and symbol-to-sound mapping principles, and multiple morphological, morphosyntactic and phonologically conditioned processes. Although much is now known about the psycholinguistics of their acquisition, an elegant grouping solution is yet to be attempted. Next steps in this endeavour are outlined.