This study was conducted to determine whether the proportional distribution of relative types produced by children with SLI differs from that produced by children with typical language. Given that children with SLI have difficulties with syntactically complex productions, the current study specifically considers whether children with SLI, when using relatives, show greater proportional use of propositionally less complex structures than their MLU-matched peers.

PARTICIPANTS

Examined child-conversational language samples were collected (Hadley, 1998) and analyzed to study the complex syntactic development of children with SLI.

21 children with SLI
23 typically developing children matched on MLU (+/-2)

METHODS

Relative clause types were classified by consensus among four authors using a coding scheme adapted from Diessel (2004) and Dessel and Tomasello (2000).

Diessel and Tomasello (2005) posit a bottom-up sequence of relative clause acquisition which begins with single proposition constructions where the predicate nominal (PN) of a presentational copular clause is modified by the relative clause (e.g., *This is the cat that chases mice*). Children’s repertoire of relative productions later expands to more complex constructions among two propositions (e.g., *The cat that chases mice eats cheese*).

Within the spontaneous language of typical language learners, Diessel and Tomasello (2000) reported a 71% to 37% decrease in the proportion of PN-relatives to all other relative types between the ages of 3 to 5.

They speculate that the early proportional frequency of PN-relatives may be related to these factors: 1. PN’s are frequently occurring in adult input provided to children. 2. The pragmatic function of PN’s may correspond to early communicative needs. 3. PN’s are less propositionally complex than other relative types that express relationships between two situations.