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Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Overgeneration of de/the in young children: Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

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BUCLD, 3-5 November, 2017

Introduction
- Cross-linguistically, children overgenerate definite articles in indefinite contexts;
  (1) Situation: discourse-initial utterance from one friend to another; no shared beliefs about particular mouse.
  a. Adult/child: 'I have chased the mouse away this morning'
  b. Child: 'I have chased the mouse away this morning'
- The age at which children supposedly stop making this error ranges from 4-10:
  • Schaeffer & Matthewson (2005) (SM) find that monolingual TD English-acquiring children stop overgenerating definite articles around age 4
  • Van Hout, Harrigan & De Villiers (2010) (HHV) report overgeneration of the until age 5.8
  • Kremer, van Hout & Hollebrandse (2015) (KHH) (using HHV’s methods) find that monolingual TD Dutch-acquiring children overgenerate the definite article de up until age 10.

Current study
- Attempting to resolve these mixed results, and to obtain insight into Dutch-acquiring children’s article choice development, we applied the methods of two different studies (Schaeffer & Matthewson 2005 (SM) and van Hout, Harrigan & de Villiers 2010 (HHV)) to one group of Dutch-acquiring children (N=62) aged 2-9 and adult controls (N=23).

Method – S&M
Sentence Elicitation Task
- Experimenter 1 watches screen with participant, Experimenter 2 sits across, cannot see screen.

Method – HHV
NP Elicitation Task
- Experimenter reads story and asks participant to answer question.

Results

Discussion & Conclusions
- Different methods lead to different results:
  • Adults score at ceiling in the SM conditions, while only around 70% correct in the HHV conditions;
  • Children score adultlike in the relevant SM indefinite condition from age 4 on, while still overgenerating the definite article at age 9 in the HHV indefinite condition;
  • The results lend support to SM’s hypothesis that children younger than 4 lack the pragmatic CNSA.
  • Overgeneration of de (‘the’) until age 9 in HHV’s indefinite condition:
    - it is unlikely that children as old as 9 have unranked constraints;
    - this particular indefinite condition does not clearly elicit an indefinite article, as witnessed by the fact that even the adults produce definite articles in this condition at a rate of 18%.

References

Background – S&M

Contact A
Definite (Referential)
Referent assumed to exist
the (definite)

Contact B
Indefinite (Referential)
Referent assumed to exist
a (definite)

Contact C
Non-referential
Referent assumed to exist
a (definite)

Knowledge of speaker/hearer assumptions required → pragmatics.
- Children < 4 lack Concept of Non-Shared Assumptions (CNSA): Speaker and hearer assumptions are independent.

Background – HHV
Optimality Theory
- Two constraints determine article choice:
  • DETERMINED REFERENCE = definite article corresponds to discourse referent with determined reference → Ranked highest
  • AVOID INDEFINITES
  • Children have unranked constraints

Adult tableaux:

(Dotted lines between two constraints indicate that constraints are not yet ranked)

- the-overuse with non-determined referent

Child tableaux: unranked constraints

- the-overuse with non-determined referent

References