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

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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 1: ‘I have chased a 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
    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.

Definite referential

Exp 1: ‘Who do you see in the picture?’
Part: ‘Kamuy’
Exp 2: ‘And what did Kamuy just do?’
Part: ‘He pushed the/a train’

Indefinite referential

Exp 1: ‘What else do you see?’
Part: ‘A cow’
Exp 2: ‘A what?’
Part: ‘A cow’

Indefinite non-referential

Exp 1: ‘Ehren says, ‘Oh I’m so bored, I don’t know what to do. Oh, I know, I’m going to the kitchen and I’m going to bake something. Exp 2: ‘What do you think Ehren will do in the kitchen? Part: ‘He is going to bake a/the color at the pot.’

Method – HHV

NP Elicitation Task

Experimenter reads story and asks participant to answer question.

Definite unique

Exp: ‘A rooster and a goat were walking in the meadow. One of the animals fell in a hole and said “cook-a-doodle-doo”?’ What was it?
Part: ‘The rooster’
A rooster

Indefinite non-unique

Exp: ‘Three cows and a dog were walking over a bridge. One of them fell in the water and said “moo!” What was it?’
Part: ‘A cow’
The cow

Results

Figure 1. Definite referential (SM test)  Figure 2. Definite unique (HHV test)

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