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/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.

Background – S&M

Condition A

Definite referential

Indefinite referential

Indefinite non-referential

Referent assumed to exist by speaker & hearer

the (definite)

a (an)

unranked

Condition B

Definite referential

Indefinite referential

Indefinite non-referential

Referent assumed to exist by speaker only

a (an)

unranked

Condition C

Definite referential

Indefinite referential

Indefinite non-referential

Referent assumed to exist by neither speaker nor hearer

a (an)

unranked

Knowledge of speaker/hearer assumptions required – pragmatics.
• Children < 4 lack Concept of Non-Shared Assumptions (CNSA): Speaker and hearer assumptions are independent.
= Overgeneralization of context A to context B

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

Determined referent

Indefinite referential

Avoid indefinites

Determinant

Determined referent

Avoid indefinites

Missing input

Determined referent

Avoid indefinites

Child tableaux: unranked constraints

Determinant

Determined referent

Avoid indefinites

Determinant

Determined referent

Avoid indefinites

(Dotted lines between two constraints indicate that constraints are not yet ranked)
= the-overuse with non-determined referent

References

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=82) 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

Indefinite referential

Indefinite non-referential

Exp 1. Why do you see in the picture? Part: Katrijn
Exp 2. And what did Katrijn just do? Part: She pushed the bug
Exp 3. Katrijn says: Oh, I'm so bored. I don't know what to do.
Exp 4. I'm going to bake a pie.
Exp 5. I'm going to bake a pie.

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: "look-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

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%.

Results

0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

Figure 1. Definite referential (SM test)
Figure 2. Definite unique (HHV test)
Figure 3. Indefinite referential (SM test)
Figure 4. Indefinite non-unique (HHV test)
Figure 5. Indefinite non-referential (SM test)