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/said: ‘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
Contact A: Definite Referential
Referent assumed to exist by speaker and hearer: the (definite)
Contact B: Non-definite Referential
Referent assumed to exist by speaker only: a (non-definite)
Contact C: Non-definite Non-referential
Referent assumed to exist by neither speaker nor hearer: a (non-definite and non-referential)

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

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<th>Condition</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Adults</th>
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Child tableaux: unranked constraints

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Current study
 attempt 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 screens watch, participant, Experimenter 2 sits across, cannot siee 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% are correct in the HHV conditions.
  • Children score adulthood in the relevant SM definite condition from age 4 on, while still overgenerating the definitive article at age 9 in the HHV indefinite condition.
  • The results lend support to SM’s hypothesis that children younger than 4 lack the unpragmatic 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

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)