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;
  - Situation: discourse-initial utterance from one friend to another; no shared beliefs about particular mouse.
  - Adult/child: ‘I have chased the mouse away this morning’
  - 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 overgeneralization 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=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
  - Exp 2: Who do you see in the picture?
    - Part: Eerste
  - Indefinite referential
  - Exp 2: And what did Eerste just do?
    - Part: She pushed the”a” mouse
  - Indefinite non-referential
  - Exp 2: Eerste says: Oh, I’m so bored, I don’t know what to do. Oh, I know, I’m going to bake something.
    - Exp 2: What do you think Eerste will do in the kitchen?
    - Part: She is going to bake a”a” pizza

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
  - 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

Background – S&M

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

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

Results

- Children 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 Censa.
- 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%.

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


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