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: discover-initial utterance from one friend to another; no shared beliefs about particular mouse.

- Adult/coll: ’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 overgeneration until the age of 5.8
  - Kremer, van Hout & Hollebrandse (2015) (KHH) 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
- Indefinite referential
- Indefinite non-referential

Method – HHV

NP Elicitation Task

- Experimenter reads story and asks participant to answer question.

Results

- 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

- 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
    - Avoid indefinites
  - Adult tableaux: determined reference

    - Determined referent
    - Avoid indefinites
  - Child tableaux: unranked constraints

    - Determined referent

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%.