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

## Background – S&M

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context A</th>
<th>Definite (Referential)</th>
<th>Referent assumed to exist by speaker only</th>
<th>the (definite)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context B</td>
<td>Definite (Referential)</td>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by speaker only</td>
<td>a (definite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context C</td>
<td>Definite (Referential)</td>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by speaker only</td>
<td>a (definite)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

- DETERMINED REFERENCE = definite article corresponds to discourse referent with determined reference → Ranked highest
- AVOID INDEFINITES
- Children have unranked constraints

### Adult tableaux

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Determined referent</th>
<th>Determined referent</th>
<th>Avoid Indefinites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Child tableaux: unranked constraints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Determined referent</th>
<th>Determined referent</th>
<th>Avoid Indefinites</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Dotted lines between two constraints indicate that constraints are not yet ranked)

→ the-overuse with non-determined referent

### References


Kremer, Mark van, Angeliek van Houw, Bart Hollebrandse. 2015. “The role of working memory and theory of mind in the acquisition of definiteness in Dutch children.”

## 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 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 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%.

## Method – S&M

### Sentence Elicitation Task

Experiment 1 watches screen with participant, Experiment 2 sits across, cannot see screen.

### Method – HHV

#### NP Elicitation Task

Experimenter reads story and asks participant to answer question.

### Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th># Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - Definite (Referential)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Indefinite Referential</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Indefinite/Non-Referential</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 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.

a. Adult/chid: ‘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 overgeneralizing definite articles around age 4
  - Van Houw, Harrigan & de Villiers (2010) (HHV) report overgeneralization of the until age 5.8
  - Kremer, van Houw & Hollebrandse (2015) (KHH) (using HHV’s methods) find that monolingual TD Dutch-acquiring children overgeneralize the definite article de up until age 10.

## Current study

Attemping 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 Houw, Harrigan & de Villiers 2010 (HHV)) to one group of Dutch-acquiring children (N=82) aged 2-9 and adult controls (N=23).