Overgeneration of de/the in young children

Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

Keydeniers, D.J.; Eliazer, Jeanne; Schaeffer, J.C.

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Overgeneration of *de/the* in young children: Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

Darlene Keydeniers, Jeanne Eliazer & Jeannette Schaeffer
University of Amsterdam
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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.
  - 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.

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.

Method – HHV

NP Elicitation Task

Experimenter reads story and asks participant to answer question.

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

Background – S&M

Context A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definite (Referential)</th>
<th>Referent assumed to exist by speaker and hearer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definite (Non-referential)</td>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by speaker only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context C</td>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by either speaker or hearer</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

Results

- Overgeneralization of context A to context B

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.
  - Overgeneralization 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