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/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=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.

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% 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

• 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Default</th>
<th>Referee assumed to exist</th>
<th>default reference</th>
<th>Avoid (indefinites)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>the (def)</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>the (def)</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Child tableaux: unranked constraints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Default</th>
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