Overgeneration of de/the in young children

Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

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Citation for published version (APA):
Overgeneration of de/the in young children: Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

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BUCLD, 3-5 November, 2017

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.

Background – S&M
Sentence Elicitation Task
Experimenter 1 watches screen with participant, Experimenter 2 sits across, cannot see screen.

Method – S&M
Sentence 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

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