Overgeneration of de/the in young children

Comparing different methods and different theories in child Dutch

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

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
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
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 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 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.

Definite referential
Exp 2: And what did Katrijn just do? Part: She pushed the ‘a’-trik Part: And what did Ernie just do? Part: He made the ‘a’-the pizza
Exp 3: Elmo says: Oh, I’m so bored. I don’t know what to do. Oh, I know, I’m going to bake something. Exp 2: What do you think Elmo will do in the kitchen? Part: We is going to bake the ‘o’-the color of ‘the’ juis

Indefinite non-referential
Exp 1: A rooster and a goat were walking in the meadow. One of the animals fell in a hole and said: “cook-a-doodle-doo”? What was it? Part: The rooster
Exp 2: Three cows and a dog were walking over a bridge. One of them fell in the water and Part: A cow

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

Cross constraint assumptions
a. Definite referential: Referent assumed to exist by speaker and hearer
b. Indefinite non-referential: Referent assumed to exist by speaker only
c. Indefinite referential: Referent assumed to exist by either speaker or hearer

Knowledge of speaker/hearer assumptions required → pragmatics.
• Children < 4 lack Concept of Non-Shared Assumptions (CNSA): Speaker and hearer assumptions are independent.

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># Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - Definite (Referential)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Indefinite Referential</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Indefinite/Non-Referential</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child tableaux: unranked constraints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th># Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - Unique referent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Non-Unique referent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method – HHV

NP Elicitation Task
Experimenter reads story and asks participant to answer question.

Definite unique
Exp: A rooster and a goat were walking in the meadow. One of the animals fell in a hole and said: “cook-a-doodle-doo”? What was it? Part: The rooster

Indefinite non-unique
Exp: Three cows and a dog were walking over a bridge. One of them fell in the water and Part: A cow

Results

Discussion & Conclusions

References