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: discuss-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) 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 – S&M

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context A</th>
<th>Context B</th>
<th>Context C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definite referential</td>
<td>Indefinite referential</td>
<td>Indefinite non-referential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by speaker and hearer</td>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by speaker only</td>
<td>Referent assumed to exist by neither speaker nor hearer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the (definite)</td>
<td>a (non-definite)</td>
<td>a (non-definite)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge of speaker/hearer assumptions required to 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
• 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>Inferred</th>
<th>DETERMINED REFERENCE</th>
<th>AVOID INDEFINITES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a/*the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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</table>

Child tableaux: unranked constraints

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

→ the-overuse with non-determined referent

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.
  - 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