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

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.
  - Adult/child: 'I have chased the mouse away this morning'
  - 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.

- Definite referential
  - Exp 1: Who did you see in the picture?
  - Part: [frowning]
  - Exp 1: What did Katrijn just do?
  - Part: She pushed the/a train

- Indefinite referential
  - Exp 2: Who do you see in the picture?
  - Part: [smile]
  - Exp 2: And what did Ernie just do?
  - Part: He is going to bake a/the cake

- Indefinite non-referential
  - Exp 3: Elmo says: Oh, I’m so hungry. I don’t know what to do. Oh, I know. I’m going to the kitchen and I’m going to bake something.
  - Exp 3: What do you think Elmo will do in the kitchen?
  - Part: She is going to bake a/the color of the pie

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: "cock/ a rooster/*the unique condition;..."
  - Part: The rooster/*A rooster..."..."

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

Background – S&M

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 – HHV

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

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

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

→ the-overuse with non-determined referent

Child tableaux: unranked constraints

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

References