

Children's comprehension of pronouns and definites

Are children sensitive to contextual requirements?

Summary: This experiment tests children's comprehension of the requirements of use of pronouns and definites. An adult-like use of definites and pronouns imposes different but related requirements. In the case of definites, a unique referent is required in the context, whereas in the case of a pronoun, the referent in the context has to be salient. In this experiment, we use a novel word task to test 3 year olds' sensitivity to these requirements.

Theory: The analysis of the definite determiner as triggering a presupposition of its referent being unique in the utterance context is the basis for analyses of pronouns in recent accounts (cf. Elbourne 2003, 2015; Postal 1966, Schwarz 2009). Roberts (2003) refines these accounts in order to explain the respective felicity of using the one or the other in certain linguistic situations. For example, in (1), Roberts claims that using a pronoun as in (1b) is felicitous, because pronouns carry an additional saliency presupposition, while a definite article lacks this additional requirement on the utterance context and thus can not identify a clear referent here (see (1a)). In the following, we want to investigate in how far children's comprehension of pronouns and definites go along the requirements on the uniqueness and saliency of the referents proposed in Roberts (2003).

The Experiment: The experiment was set up in such a way that an experimenter and a child are skyping with Froggy on a laptop. The task is to help Froggy pack toys, because he is visiting his grandmother and has forgotten to bring his toys. The experimenter distributes three flashcards which depict unknown objects: Two of the objects look the same and one is different. Then the experimenter either talks about the unique toy, one of the two none-unique toys or about none of the toys. Froggy's utterance of the target sentence follows. In the case of the definite article, a novel noun is used in the NP complement position. With this novel word task, we made sure that children rely on their understanding of definites and pronouns to find out which toy Froggy intended: In the case of the definite article, children should pick the unique toy, whereas in the case of a pronoun, they should pick the toy the experimenter made salient. Children were divided in two groups: In group 1 (DEF/INDEF), children heard target sentences including the definite article or the indefinite article to test for a potential definite overuse as reported in previous studies (cf. Van Hout et al 2010, Karmiloff-Smith 1979, Schaefer and Matthewson 2005). In group 2 (DEF/PRO), children heard target sentences with the definite article or a pronoun (see example toys and items in (2)). The expectations for group 1 are that children should always be above chance in picking the unique toy when they hear the definite article, whereas they should be at chance at picking the unique toy in the case of the indefinite article. In group 2, we expect children to behave the same way for the definite article, but when hearing a pronoun, they should only pick the unique toy when it is made salient. The results in (3a) for group 1 and (3b) for group 2 demonstrate the percentage of children picking the unique toy in the three salience conditions were either no toy is made salient (NA), the unique toy is made salient (AU) or one of the none-unique toys is made salient (ANU). A statistical analysis was conducted with a generalized mixed model in R. As expected for group 2, children pick the unique toy almost always when it is made salient (AU), whereas they almost never pick the unique toy when one of the non-unique toys is made salient (ANU). However, there is no difference between picking the unique toy when the definite article is used as opposed to when an indefinite article is used in group 1.

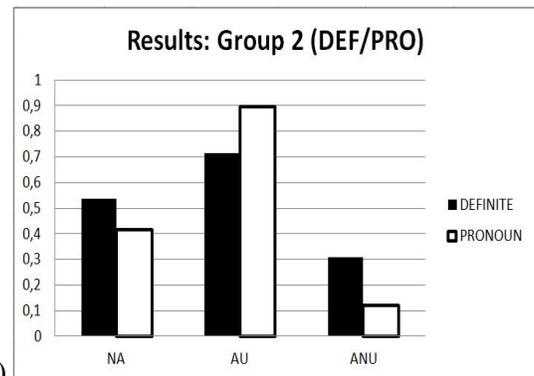
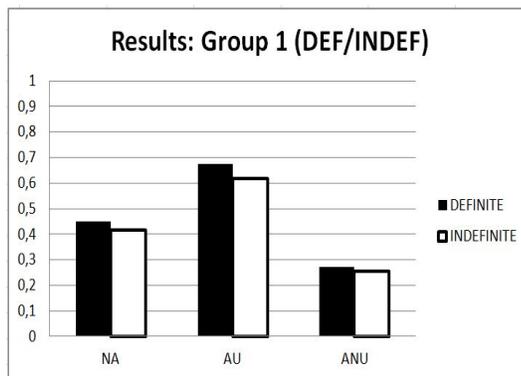
Conclusion: As in previous studies, 3 year olds demonstrate considerable difficulty in distinguishing between the indefinite and the definite article. In contrast, 3 year olds behave mostly according to expectations when confronted with a pronoun. Thus, children seem to understand the requirements on pronouns, but seem to have a hard time with distinguishing between the requirements on the definite article and their analysis of the indefinite article. Adult data will complement the present results.

- (1) *A woman entered from stage left. Another woman entered from stage right.*
- a) # *The woman* / ✓ *The FIRST woman* / ✓ *The SECOND woman* was carrying a basket of flowers. (Roberts 2003:324, example (40))
 - b) *She* was carrying a basket of flowers, while # *the woman* / ✓ *the FIRST woman* / # *the SECOND woman* led a goat. (Roberts 2003:324, example (41))



- (2) **Salience conditions:** Experimenter talks about 1) none of the toys (NA) 2) the unique toy (AU) or 3) one of the none-unique toys (ANU).

- a) Target sentence (Group 1): Pack {the blicket/a blicket} in the suitcase.
- b) Target sentence (Group 2): Pack {the blicket/ it} in the suitcase.



- (3) a) b)

Selected References

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