

The quantificational asymmetry: A comparative look

Margreet van Koert^{a,*}, Olaf Koeneman^b, Fred Weerman^a, Aafke Hulk^a



^a University of Amsterdam, Department of Dutch, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b Radboud University Nijmegen, Department of English, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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Abstract

The traditional account of the Delay of Principle B Effect (DPBE) predicts that all languages that show a DPBE will also reveal a Quantificational Asymmetry (QA). Children's performance on object-pronouns must therefore improve when a QP-subject replaces the NP-subject. These QA results have been obtained in English (modulo methodological differences), but none of the few Dutch studies reliably revealed this effect. We used similar materials to [Marinis and Chondrogianni \(2011\)](#) who used a test that induced both a DPBE and a QA in English; hence, we compared their results ($n = 33, 6;0-9;0$) to ours ($n = 29, 6;3-9;1$) on the same task. The comprehension experiment consists of bi-clausal sentences with Noun Phrase (NP) and Quantified Noun Phrase (QP) antecedents and object-pronouns and reflexives. Both Dutch and English children show a DPBE, i.e. they have problems with correctly interpreting object-pronouns, because they frequently accept interpretations in which the object-pronoun is co-identified with the NP-subject. However, only English children's performance reveals a QA, which the Dutch children do not show, as they perform similarly on NP and QP-subjects. Interestingly, a similar contrast is found for object-reflexives: where the English children's performance worsens when a QP-subject replaces the NP-subject, the Dutch children's scores are target-like on both subject types. These contrasts suggest that all children allow locally bound pronouns and reflexives (as suggested by [Spenader et al., 2009](#)) and that it is their quantifier reading preferences that determine how the object-pronoun or object-reflexive is understood. We hypothesize that these quantifier readings are language-specific: Dutch children prefer a distributive reading for QPs, which induces a bound pronoun interpretation; English children prefer a collective reading, which forbids a bound pronoun interpretation.

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1. Introduction

In the 1990s several studies showed that English-speaking children often incorrectly accept co-identification between object pronouns and local c-commanding referential Noun Phrase-antecedents (1). These same children correctly reject co-identification between object-pronouns and local c-commanding Quantified Noun Phrase-antecedents (2). The ameliorating effect of QP subjects is known as the Quantificational Asymmetry ([Elbourne, 2005](#)).

- (1) The boy_i scratched him_i. [incorrect acceptance]
(2) Every boy_i scratched him_i. [correct rejection]

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 20 525 46 49.

E-mail addresses: M.J.H.vanKoert@uva.nl (M. van Koert), o.koeneman@ru.nl (O. Koeneman), F.P.Weerman@uva.nl (F. Weerman), A.C.J.Hulk@uva.nl (A. Hulk).

Explanations of the Quantificational Asymmetry predict that this phenomenon should be found in all languages in which children perform poorly on (1) (cf. Chien and Wexler, 1990). In the literature, several indications can be found that this prediction does not hold (for Russian: Avrutin and Wexler, 1992; for Dutch: Drozd and Koster, 1999), but until now a systematic comparison of the Quantificational Asymmetry in two different languages has not been made. In this paper we will do exactly that: we will present experimental evidence from Dutch children, who show a significantly different behaviour from English children tested in precisely the same way (Marinis and Chondrogianni, 2011) and we will discuss in detail the theoretical consequences of the apparent language-specific character of the Quantificational Asymmetry.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2, we report the main empirical findings with regard to the acquisition of reflexives and pronouns. The research questions are formulated in Section 3 and the present study is described together with its participants, method and procedures. Subsequently, in Section 4 the statistical results are presented. Then, in Section 5, we provide an account for these results by hypothesizing that children have preferred readings for universal quantifiers, with English children preferring a collective interpretation for *every* and Dutch children preferring a distributive interpretation for *elk(e)* ‘every’. These preferences explain the differences between these two learner groups. Section 6 concludes the paper and offers some suggestions on where these different preferences may come from.

2. Acquisition of the binding principles

Generally, object-reflexives show a different distribution from object-pronouns (cf. (3) and (4)) and their different behaviour is captured by the binding principles (Chomsky, 1981). Whereas Principle A states that reflexives must be bound by their local c-commanding antecedents, as in (3), Principle B states that pronominals cannot be bound by their local c-commanding antecedents, as in (4).

- (3) The hippo_i says the seahorse_j is washing himself_{i/j}
 (4) The hippo_i says that the seahorse_j is washing him_{i/*j/k}

In (3), the reflexive *himself* can only be bound by its local antecedent, *the seahorse*, but not by the subject of the matrix clause, *the hippo*. In (4), on the other hand, the pronoun *him* cannot be bound by its local antecedent, *the seahorse*, but can be co-identified with the subject in the matrix clause or with an antecedent outside of the sentence. The possible co-identification relations for *himself* and *him* are expressed by co-indexation.

In Section 2.1 we will look at the basic empirical results obtained in previous studies on the acquisition of binding. Subsequently, Section 2.2 will discuss the experiments that induced these findings.

2.1. Basic empirical findings

Language acquisition studies found two remarkable phenomena whilst investigating children’s comprehension of the binding principles: the delay of Principle B effect (DPBE) and the Quantificational Asymmetry (QA).

The term *DPBE* covers the finding that in some languages – such as English and Dutch – 4-year-olds perform well on Principle A conditions but that problems with Principle B persist until these children are 7 years old (cf. for English: Chien and Wexler, 1990; van der Lely and Stollwerck, 1997; Wexler and Chien, 1985; cf. for Dutch: Koster, 1993; Philip and Coopmans, 1996). For sentences such as (3), 4-year-olds correctly reject a non-local antecedent and correctly accept a local antecedent. For (4), children from 4 years onwards correctly accept a non-local antecedent and one occurring outside of the sentence; yet, rejecting the local antecedent for the pronoun is often problematic until they are 7. The acquisition of Principle B, in relation to Principle A, seems to be delayed by a few years, hence the coinage of the term DPBE. It refers to the errors children make on Principle B conditions, whilst at the same time performing correctly on Principle A. The standard explanation for the DPBE (cf. Chien and Wexler, 1990) is to assume that children do know Principle B but that they use semantics to override Principle B. Children, in contrast to adults, have the antecedent and pronoun accidentally refer to the same individual. This difference between Principles A and B in performance is not found for children acquiring Romance languages (cf. for French: Jakubowicz, 1989; for Spanish: Baauw, 2002), German (Ruigendijk et al., 2010), or Norwegian (Hestvik and Philip, 1999). In these languages, young children perform equally well on reflexives and pronouns, often scoring above 80% correct. This highlights the fact that the DPBE is a language-specific phenomenon that must be influenced by morpho-syntactic features of a particular language.

The QA is related to the DPBE, i.e. languages that show a DPBE are predicted to display a QA, too, see (1) and (2). The type of antecedent causes this asymmetry with respect to pronouns: whereas children incorrectly allow co-identification between the object-pronoun *him* and the NP subject, they disallow co-identification when the local subject is a QP. The QA appears in many studies on the acquisition of English (Chien and Wexler, 1990; van der Lely and Stollwerck, 1997; Marinis and Chondrogianni, 2011), so that it is a relatively robust finding for English. The QA follows from Chien and Wexler’s suggestion that children use semantics (accidental co-reference) to override Principle B. Since QPs cannot refer

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