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Egocentric definiteness errors and perspective evaluation in preschool children☆

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Abstract

This paper investigates preschool children's errors in their use of definite vs. indefinite determiners to encode the newness of referents. It focuses on so-called ''egocentric errors'' (whereby a definite is used for a referent not previously introduced in the discourse) and explores possible cognitive sources for such errors. 45 children acquiring French as their first language (between the ages of 2;6.22 and 5;6.15) were made to perform two tests: a picture-based story-elicitation task and a Theory of Mind (ToM) test. The latter aimed to evaluate their ability to perceive differences between their own perspective and that of their addressee. No straightforward correlation was found between the rate of egocentric errors and performance on the ToM test, suggesting that egocentric errors cannot be due simply to children's inability to appreciate that their listener can have a different perspective to their own. It is suggested that ToM development could nonetheless be one among several factors conspiring (perhaps indirectly) to the production of egocentric errors. Other likely factors are (i) preschool children's tendency to monitor insufficiently the difference in perspective between themselves and their addressee – something which adults are also found to do, but to a much lesser extent – and (ii) their over-reliance on the visual context.

Keywords: Definite; Indefinite; Theory of Mind; Egocentric errors; Perspective; Discourse competence; Spoken French

1. Introduction

Children's use of definites vs. indefinites has been the focus of considerable attention for the past 40 years. In that period, the field has also seen significant theoretical developments in the area of discourse pragmatics/information structure. This in turn has enhanced our understanding of various aspects of children's competence in that area. In particular, it has been shown that the information structure[1] knowledge necessary to encode topic vs. focus is in place at least as early as 2;6 and that the *linguistic* competence underpinning the use of definites vs. indefinites is in place from around 2;6 (De Cat, 2009, 2011). However, a small margin of errors in particular contexts remain unaccounted for. This study investigates so-called 'egocentric' errors in preschool children's use of definiteness distinctions to encode the information status of discourse referents. Egocentric errors (Maratsos, 1974; Warden, 1976; Karmiloff-Smith, 1979;

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[1] Following Lambrecht (1994) and Erteschik (2007) among many others, information structure is understood here to intervene at all meaning-bearing levels of the grammatical system. It is defined as ''the cognitive domain mediating between the various modules of linguistic competence (syntax, phonology, and morphology) and other cognitive faculties that serve the central purpose of the fixation of belief by way of information update'' (Zimmermann and Féry, 2009).

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Emslie and Stevenson, 1981) arise where the child uses a definite on first mention of a specific referent, in absence of hearer knowledge, as in (1).

(1) # He takes the block. (block unknown to hearer)

The encoding of information in conversation is intrinsically an interactive process, in which the speaker has to evaluate the hearer's knowledge state, i.e. monitor which referents are new or salient from their point of view, in order to determine how to best encode them in their own speech. Beyond the linguistic competence required to adequately map the information status of referents onto the appropriate structures and lexical items, what is also required is the cognitive ability to perceive differences in perspective between one's own and that of one's addressee. Maratsos (1974:454) argues that young children often have difficulty with *keeping track of their listener's referential knowledge*, especially before the age of 5.

In the literature, the investigation of children's mastery of definiteness distinctions to encode referential status is mainly based on elicitation tasks. Usually, a context is established by telling the child a short story (Karmiloff-Smith, 1979; Maratsos, 1974) (sometimes with the help of pictures, as in Zehler and Brewer, 1982) or by witnessing a scene (Schaeffer and Matthewson, 2005). The child is then asked a question about one of the referents (Maratsos, 1974; Schaeffer and Matthewson, 2005) or made to complete the story (Zehler and Brewer, 1982). Another design consists in making the child tell a story to a blindfolded interviewer, based on a sequence of pictures (Warden, 1976, 1981; Emslie and Stevenson, 1981; Power and Dal Martello, 1986). In all these designs, the child has to mention referents that have not yet been introduced in the context. Adults are assumed to produce indefinites in such cases (Kadmon, 2000). In contrast to the above, Schafer and de Villiers (2000) relied on children's own world as a source of referents known to themselves but not their addressee. Van Hout et al. (2010) also used an innovative research design, investigating both production (with and without visual prompts) and comprehension – the latter via a truth-value judgement task (to test which interpretations of *a* vs. *the* are available) and a referent-selection task (to test the preferred interpretation of *a* vs. *the*).

A common assumption in the generative literature has been that pragmatic competence lags behind syntactic competence in first language acquisition. Schaeffer and Matthewson (2005), following Schaeffer (2000), argue that very young children lack the pragmatic *Concept of Non-Shared Assumptions*, which states that ''Speaker and hearer assumptions are always independent'' Schaeffer and Matthewson (2005:69). Schaeffer (2000) argues that this concept becomes available to the child around age 3 because of maturation. Schaeffer and Matthewson (2005:86) suggest that this concept is acquired on the basis of experience, because of communication breakdowns. What remains unclear on that account is why egocentric errors remain marginal before the age of 3 (75% of items in the relevant condition are error-free in the Schaeffer and Matthewson study): what leads the child to postulate independence of assumptions most of the time, in spite of immaturity of the relevant pragmatic concept?

If in most cases (under identical conditions) children correctly use indefinites on first mention of a referent, we should assume that they have the relevant linguistic competence, i.e. that they know that indefinites are used to signal to the hearer the existence (and/or relevance) of a specific referent not yet mentioned in the discourse and not yet present to the hearer's mind. The use of definites in a limited number of cases could arise from a failure to *evaluate* either what has been mentioned before in the discourse, or what is not present to the hearer's mind.

Interestingly, children's rates of egocentric errors vary a lot among groups of similar ages, not only across studies, but also within studies. Maratsos (1974) reports a significant amount of variation among 4-year-olds, which was not straightforwardly correlated to age. Striking differences are observed even between studies using identical designs. For instance, Warden (1976) and Emslie and Stevenson (1981) report 54% vs. 16% of egocentric errors respectively in their 3-year old group. Schafer and de Villiers (2000) is the only study reporting a total absence of egocentric errors.[2] This suggests that the way in which the common ground is established has a significant impact on the child's ability to keep track of their interlocutor's perspective. In particular, the use of visual prompts in most studies may have played an important role: in spite of the blindfold, children may have assumed that what was visible to themselves was also visible to their addressee. This aspect of cognitive development is part of Theory of Mind, i.e. the ability to evaluate the mental states of others, and in particular their beliefs and desires (see e.g. O'Neill et al., 1992; de Villiers, 2007; Doherty, 2009). Aichhorn et al. (2006) have demonstrated that visual perspective tasks only require a specific component of Theory of Mind: that which enables the realisation that minds can take different perspectives on the world because they represent it differently. In their study of preschool children's use of *a* vs. *the*, Schafer and de Villiers (2000) explicitly predict that Theory of Mind failers should use *the* differently from adults. Van Hout et al. (2010) also invoke (second order) Theory of Mind as a

[2] They do report *the*-over use in one condition where a group of unindividuated referents is introduced and then something happens to one of them, but do not attribute these errors to egocentricity (or Theory of Mind development – see below). Rather, the difficulty is argued to arise from having to select one object from a set of like-objects (Schafer and de Villiers, 2000:618).