

A reinterpretation of the quantificational asymmetry

We investigated the comprehension of Dutch reflexives (*zichzelf* ‘SE-self’) and pronouns (*hem* ‘him’) by Dutch children (n=29). We used a Picture Verification Task (van der Lely, 1997) where children judged whether the sentence matched the picture. Items were of the type [NP says [NP V NP]], where the embedded subject could be a referential NP (*the rabbit*) or a QP (*every rabbit*), and the embedded object a pronoun or a reflexive. When we compared our results to Marinis & Chondrogianni’s study (2011) into English children (n=33) – who used the same task – we discovered differences between the Dutch and English children in the following mismatch conditions (where test sentences did not match the picture):

Test sentence

- (1) [the horse says [the rabbit V pronoun]]
- (2) [the horse says [every rabbit V pronoun]]
- (3) [the horse says [every rabbit V reflexive]]

Picture

- (rabbit scratching himself)
- (rabbits scratching themselves)
- (rabbits scratching horse)

The differences:

- (A) Although both Dutch and English children erroneously accept a local antecedent for a pronoun in (1) (presumably because they mistakenly have them co-refer in the discourse, cf. Chien & Wexler (1990)), only English children reject this when the embedded subject is a QP, as in (2). In other words, only they show the Quantificational Asymmetry (QA) (i.e. children perform better on QP-antecedents than on NP-antecedents when the object is a pronoun).
- (B) For (3), English children score 50% but Dutch children 90% correct.

We argue that these differences between English and Dutch call for a reinterpretation of the QA. The fact that QPs lead to a better performance on the interpretation of pronouns has been interpreted as showing that children have knowledge of Principle B, because it is exactly in this context that co-reference is excluded and children must rely on their syntactic knowledge. We argue that the better performance of English children on this QP-pronoun condition is a consequence of a preference for a collective reading of *every* (cf. Novogrodsky, Roeper, Yamakoshi, 2012). This reading blocks the interpretation of an object pronoun as a bound variable, which leads children to reject co-identification between the pronoun and the QP-subject. The same ingredient accounts for the finding that the QP-reflexive condition is relatively difficult for English children. If there is a preference for a distributive interpretation (Drozd & van Loosbroek, 2006) – as for Dutch *elk(e)* ‘every’ – the QP-reflexive condition is relatively easy, and the QA disappears in the pronoun conditions.

If so, the knowledge gap between children and adults may be wider than previously thought. Whereas adults do not generally interpret a pronoun to express a reflexive relation, children may do. Only one context prohibits it: the one in which the object pronoun co-occurs with a local QP-subject that is interpreted collectively. Under our analysis, the fact that no co-identification takes place between the QP and the object pronoun is a consequence of how English children preferably interpret the QP and it reveals little about their understanding of the complementary syntax of pronouns and reflexives.

Word count: 498

References

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