Rapid Acquisition of Expletive Negation in Modern Hebrew

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Introduction

• Expletive Negation (EN): the occurrence of a negative marker without apparent negative force.
• Crosslinguistically common:
  1) Me quedare hasta que no me echen. I will stay until that they throw me out.
     (Spanish; Espinal 2000:61)
  2) Ja postodu poky ty ne prideli. I will wait until you arrive.
     (Russian; Abels 2005:54)
  3) dani yamdi lišon ad  še-ha-mesiba lo tatil. Danny continue to sleep until that the-party NEG start
     (Modern Hebrew; Eilam 2009:42)
• See Eilam (2009) on the semantics of EN in Hebrew.
• The acquisition of EN is a notable feat: children must learn to associate the negative marker with a non-negation interpretation in a restricted set of linguistic environments, and to avoid generalizing this interpretation (cf. Baker’s Paradox; Pinker 1989).
• Two factors potentially hamper the acquisition of EN:
  1) Acquisition of the negative marker in its standard function is early and robust: it is one of the components of children’s earliest vocabulary (Pea 1980), and is common in both children’s speech (CS) and child-directed speech (CDS).
  2) The rarity of EN in the input: only 4 tokens (e.g. (4)) are found in the Poland Longitudinal Corpus of Hebrew, among a total of 42 uses of until (9.5%) and a total of 8451 tokens of the negative marker lo (0.06%) in CDS (see Grinstead 2004 for similar findings from Spanish). Also, not all occurrences of negation under until in CS and CDS are EN (cf. (5)).

Previous Research


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• This study contributes to a growing body of literature illustrating the relative effectiveness with which children acquire word meanings.
• Hebrew-speaking children’s success at acquiring EN may be attributable to a number of facilitating factors, including (i) the implausibility of an SN interpretation in certain linguistic contexts, (ii) children’s sensitivity to the discourse context, and (iii) their awareness of speaker intentions (Bloom 2000).
• From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates that alternatives to the TVT paradigm should sometimes be preferred in assessing children’s competences: the task complexity of previous studies may have masked children’s knowledge of EN.

Methods

• Subjects: 83 Hebrew-speaking children (age range 3;5-7;1; M=5;1) and 20 adults (age range 23-58; M=36).
• Procedure: Act-out task, with minimal working memory demands and situational complexity, unlike the TVT. The target sentences allow a plausible SN interpretation, on a par with the EN interpretation.
• Example: A box is placed before the subject. 10 marbles are placed inside the box and an equal number outside it.
  1) El cerdito estuvo comiendo el helado hasta que Pooh offered him the cookie. ¬EN interpretation
  2) El cerdito estuvo comiendo el helado hasta que Pooh did not offer him the cookie. EN interpretation

Results

• Hebrew-speaking children acquire EN as early as age 4.
• 9 subjects (10%) failed the control trial, the oldest of which was 5;3.
• Using E-logit transformed data of proportions, a linear model based on subject means revealed a reliable effect of age (p<.01). Furthermore, subjects were above chance by the age of 4 (p<.001).
• Select tests were counterbalanced in terms of order of presentation and sentence used (cf. (7)), for a total of 4 lists.

Conclusions

• This study contributes to a growing body of literature illustrating the relative effectiveness with which children acquire word meanings.
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References


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