Children’s Understanding of Polarity Items
Ming Xiang, Anastasia Conroy, Jeffrey Lidz and Andrea Zukowski

LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND
• All three forms are interpreted as an indefinite (the existential quantifier) at the logical
  respect to negation.
• Specifically, the three kinds of indefinites show different scope interpretations with
  respect to negation.

Evidence concerning “any” not conclusive

Previous Research – Do children understand scope ambiguity?

Mixed results
• Isomorphic scope – children incorrectly interpret some in their surface syntactic position, namely, the narrow scope within negation. (Musolino, Crain & Thornton 2000)
• When the experimental design is felicitous for the wide scope interpretation of indefinites, children show adult behavior.
  • Guzmán 2004 – children are sensitive to the felicitous expectation of negation.
  • Miller & Schmitt 2004 – children are sensitive to the implicit partitive interpretation of the wide scope meaning of indefinites

Experiment 1

Truth-Value Judgment Task

Condition 1 Joe didn’t eat a pea.
Condition 2 Joe didn’t eat some peas.
Condition 3 Joe didn’t eat any peas.

All logically possible outcomes

Condition scope interaction and the correspondent answer for the TVJT

1 a-NP (wide scope optional) Neg > ? Neg
2 some (wide scope required) ? > Neg (No) Yes
3 any (wide scope impossible) No (Yes)

Answers in parentheses are grammatically unacceptable

Expt Results: (n=17, range 4:5-5:5, average 4:10)

Children understand any as a NPI, but they treat some as a normal indefinite like a-NP, instead of a PPI.

Children don’t really understand any, but they have difficulty accessing non-isomorphic scope. This leads to apparently adult-like behavior on any, but non-adult-like behavior on some.

Conclusions and Future Questions

Children do have a tendency to interpret indefinites as having surface narrow scope

Future questions:
• Whether at some earlier stage of development children have ever considered any as a normal indefinite and performed scope errors.
• At what point children will acquire the special property of some.

Experiment 2—Explicit Partitivity

• To show that on independent grounds children have no a priori difficulty interpreting a noun phrase with non-isomorphic scope.

• Same stories, but the test conditions are all in partitive forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Joe didn’t eat any of the peas</th>
<th>Joe didn’t eat one of the peas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neg &gt; Neg</td>
<td>(wide scope required)</td>
<td>(wide scope required)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>(wide scope impossible)</td>
<td>(wide scope impossible)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This shows that children have no a priori difficulty with non-isomorphic interpretations.

References


