Universal Grammar and the Acquisition of Semantic Knowledge: An Experimental Investigation into the Acquisition of Quantifier-Negation Interaction in English

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Abstract
This dissertation explores the way in which English-speaking children acquire the meaning of sentences containing negation and quantified noun phrases (QNPs). This investigation is based on a series of psycholinguistic experiments designed to assess children's comprehension of sentences like 'Every horse didn't jump over the fence' or 'Cookie Monster didn't eat two slices of pizza' among others. The major finding is that children around the age of 5 do not interpret these sentences the way adult speakers of English do. This finding raises the following questions (a) How and why do children's interpretations of sentences containing negation and quantified noun phrases differ from those of adults? (b) How do children manage to converge onto the adult system of interpretation?

Regarding the first question, it appears that children's non-adult interpretations are nevertheless systematic, i.e. governed by principle. Specifically, children (unlike adults) are found to map overt syntactic relations between QNPs and negation and their relative semantic interpretation isomorphically. This, however, is just a descriptive generalization. The observation of isomorphism is treated as an epiphenomenon, derived from the interplay between a universally encoded dichotomy splitting the class of QNPs and learnability considerations. Regarding the second question, I show that children can move from their system of interpretation to the adult system solely on the basis of positive evidence and thus, that the observed difference does not create a learnability problem. In summary, this dissertation uncovers a new area where the linguistic behavior of children and adults diverge: the comprehension of sentences containing negation and quantified noun phrases. The rest of the dissertation is a methodological statement, namely that it is not only desirable but also possible to account for the observed difference between children and adults without invoking any differences between the two groups beyond minimal conceptual necessity. To the extent that this goal is achieved, the present investigation emphasizes the role played by the theory of Universal Grammar and language learnability in helping us understand language development and its biological basis.

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