Developmental steps in expressing contrast – cross-linguistic experimental evidence

Negative polarity and conventional implicatures have been identified as constitutive meaning elements of adversative connectives (Louwerse 2001, Blakemore 2002, Evers-Vermeul & Sanders 2009). By conventional implicature, adversative connectives trigger the inference that the conjoined propositions should not hold together. Thus contrast relations imply negative polarity involving syntactically overt or covert negation. The present production study investigated syntactic factors like co-ordination and expression of negation to gain insights into the processes underlying the acquisition of contrast types in German, English, and Bulgarian as languages with differently shaped adversative systems.

We present data from a sentence-continuation experiment with 3-, 4- and 6-year-old monolingual children and adult control groups based on pictures depicting alternative actions. Production of adversative sentences was prompted by means of a positive or a negative first clause, e.g. '*She wants to collect chestnuts but …*' vs. '*She doesn't want to collect chestnuts but…* '. We analysed the syntactic complexity of the produced continuations (full clauses, finite predicate, infinitive, or objects) and the realisation of overt negation. These properties allow inferences about the interpretation of an adversative utterance as a contrast relation situated on the content (Semantic Opposition), or on the epistemic or pragmatic level (Denial of Expectation).

The pattern found in adult production indicated preferences for clausal coordination with Denial of Expectation reading for German *aber*, English *but* and Bulgarian *no,* and for Semantic Opposition with Bulgarian *a*. These preferences were only slightly affected by the presence of negation in the prompt. However, children's interpretation of adversative connectives as Semantic Opposition markers was aided by the presence of negation. We also found a significant interaction of polarity and syntactic complexity. In all languages, three-year-olds often produced ill-formed adversative sentences by conjoining two positive sub-clausal elements, clausal co-ordinations being mostly well-formed. Older children produced significantly more negation markers in all co-ordination types. They also produced clausal co-ordinations to express inference driven Denial of Expectation with covert negation, e.g., *She wants to collect chestnuts, but she needs to go home*. We discuss these findings with respect to developmental steps in the intertwining of negative polarity and syntactic co-ordination in the construal of contrast relations.

References:

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