

Children's use of referring expressions in spontaneous discourse: Implications for theory of mind development

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Received 2 February 2011; received in revised form 5 April 2013; accepted 13 April 2013

Abstract

This paper refines and extends the empirical base of previous work on children's use of referring expressions in spontaneous discourse within the Givenness Hierarchy framework, and further develops implications of this work for our understanding of the development of a theory of mind. The study supports earlier findings that children use definite and indefinite articles, demonstrative determiners, and demonstrative and personal pronouns appropriately by age 3 or earlier. It also provides further support for two stages in mind-reading ability. The first, implicit and non-representational, includes the ability to assess memory and attention states such as familiarity and attention; the second, representational and more conscious, includes the ability to assess propositional, epistemic states such as knowledge and belief. Distinguishing the two stages provides a possible explanation for why children learn to use forms in ways consistent with their encoded information about how to mentally access an intended referent before they fully exhibit the metarepresentational ability to calculate pragmatic inferences, such as that involved in assessing how much information is relevant for the addressee.

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Keywords: Reference; Cognitive status; Theory of mind; Procedural meaning; Implicature

1. Introduction

A characteristic feature of human linguistic communication is that while linguistic form constrains possible interpretations, it grossly underdetermines a speaker's intended meaning in a given context of use. The same sentence can have different possible interpretations, but general pragmatic principles that guide language production and interpretation typically allow us to determine which of the possible interpretations is the one the speaker intended. This feature is rooted in the interactive/discursive (as distinct from purely representational) function of language.

The absence of a simple one to one mapping between linguistic form and a speaker's intended meaning is perhaps most evident in the case of nominal expressions. This is obvious for pronouns (e.g. *it*, *that*), which encode little if any conceptual content or descriptive information; but it is also true for full descriptions such as *the speakers at this conference*, *the woman in the blue dress*, and so on. The same (pro)nominal expression can be used to refer to many different things and different things can be referred to with the same expression. Thus, children acquiring their language learn, among many other things, that an entity, a particular cat, for example, can be referred to as *a cat*, *that cat*, *the cat I saw chasing a bird*, *it*, and so on. The child must also learn that the different possibilities change depending on what can be assumed about the knowledge, memory and attention state of the interlocutor at a given point in the discourse. The aim of the present work is to extend the empirical base of previous corpus analytic investigations of young children's use of

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different types of nominal expressions conducted within the Givenness Hierarchy framework (Gundel et al., 2007; Gundel, 2009, 2011), and to further develop and refine a proposal about how children's use of such expressions can help inform our understanding of their ability to assess the mental states of others.

Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework assumed in this research, the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel et al., 1993 and subsequent work). In section 3 we present results of our analysis of the use of referring expressions in spontaneous conversations of English-speaking children aged 1;9–2;8, and in section 4 we discuss implications of this research for our understanding of children's development of a theory of mind.

2. The givenness hierarchy

Gundel et al. (1993) propose that determiners (e.g. *the, this, that*) and pronouns (e.g. *it, this, that*) provide the addressee with information about how to mentally access the referent, by encoding, as part of their conventional meaning, the cognitive (memory and attention) status of the intended referent for the addressee at the point just before the form is encountered.

The cognitive statuses comprise the following 'Givenness Hierarchy', where, for purpose of illustration, English forms are listed below the cognitive statuses they directly encode.

(1) Givenness Hierarchy (GH) and Associated English Forms

in			uniquely		type	
focus	>	activated	>	familiar	>	identifiable
<i>it</i> ¹		<i>this/that/this N</i>		<i>that N</i>		<i>the N</i>
				identifiable		indefinite <i>this N</i>
						<i>a N</i>

GH statuses are (assumed) mental states, not linguistic entities; the linguistic forms that encode these statuses provide procedural information about how to access the referent, as described in (2) below.

(2)

<i>it</i>	associate representation in focus of attention
<i>this/that/this N</i>	associate representation in working memory
<i>that N</i>	associate representation in memory
<i>the N</i>	associate unique representation with determiner phrase ²
Indefinite <i>this N</i>	associate unique representation
<i>a N</i>	associate type representation

This makes it possible to explain facts like those exemplified in (3) and (4).

- (3) A1. Do you have a pet, Randy?
 B. Yeah. Currently we have a poodle.
 A2. Really? I read somewhere that the poodle is one of the most intelligent dogs around. (adapted from the Switchboard corpus, Godfrey et al., 1992)
- (4) A. Sam snores.
 B. That's rude
 B' It's rude.

In (3), the phrase *the poodle* in A2 can be interpreted as referring to Randy's poodle, introduced in B. However, it can also be interpreted generically to refer to the entire class of poodles. Both interpretations are licit here, since the article 'the' simply encodes the information that the addressee is to associate a unique representation, and either the recently mentioned poodle or the whole (unique) class of poodles would satisfy this requirement. In the former case, B could easily associate a unique representation by selecting the recently activated representation of his poodle. In the latter case, B could associate a familiar representation of the class of poodles or simply construct such a representation based on the information encoded by 'poodle'. Given the context, A probably intended the generic interpretation, and this is how B (and

¹ The pronoun *it* here stands for all personal pronouns.

² The term 'determiner phrase' (DP) is used here to refer to the whole referring phrase, either a pronoun (a determiner with no NP complement) or a determiner followed by a full noun phrase complement, here represented as 'N'.

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