



The pragmatics of articles in Dutch children with specific language impairment[☆]

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Abstract

Previous studies have found that the morpho-syntactic aspects of grammatical morphemes, including articles, pose problems for Dutch-speaking children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI). In the present study it is demonstrated that article errors in Dutch children with SLI appear to be modulated by the pragmatic context to some extent. This study examines the pragmatic aspects of articles in 19 6- to 8-year-old children with SLI, comparing the results with those of 26 monolingual typically developing age-matched (TD-AM) and 17 language-matched (TD-LM) children. An elicitation task was used to test the specific discourse-new context (definite articles) and non-specific context (indefinite articles). In both contexts, the SLI group omitted articles more often than the TD-AM group, thus behaving similarly to the younger TD-LM group. The SLI group substituted articles more often than children in both control groups. Many children in the SLI group displayed variable behaviour and relatively many children with SLI used definite articles in non-specific contexts. We conclude that processing limitations in SLI may lead to less stable lexical knowledge of articles and hinder the successful integration of lexical, syntactic and pragmatic information that is required for target-like use of articles.

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1. Introduction

Children with specific language impairment (SLI) typically have difficulties using grammatical morphology (Leonard, 2009). In Germanic languages specifically, verb inflection is a locus of errors (Dutch: De Jong, 1999; Wexler et al., 2004; English: Leonard et al., 1997; Rice and Wexler, 1996; German: Clahsen, 1989; Swedish: Hansson et al., 2000). Moreover, in the nominal domain of these languages, problems are found in the use of articles: for example in English (Leonard, 1995; Polite et al., 2011), Swedish (Hansson et al., 2003) and Dutch (Orgassa, 2009; Van Ewijk and Avrutin, 2010). These problems manifest themselves as a delay in the production of articles. For Dutch, the wrong selection of gender is also common.

Articles have grammatical functions, but also several pragmatic functions: they encode information related to the speaker, the addressee and other features of the context. More specifically, they indicate specificity, new and given information and the presence of mutual knowledge (Givón, 1995; Lyons, 1999). It is well established that children with SLI

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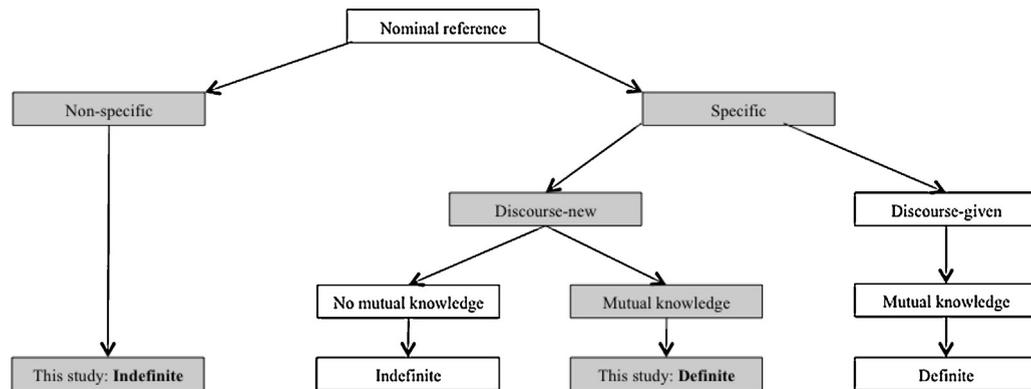


Fig. 1. Pragmatic factors governing article use in Dutch and English.
Source: Adapted from Rozendaal and Baker (2008:776).

can have difficulties with pragmatic aspects of language (Bishop, 2000). For Dutch, this has been shown at a general level (Geurts and Embrechts, 2010), and for specific narrative abilities (Parigger, 2012), but no specific work has yet been done on articles. This will be the focus of this study. The production of definite and indefinite articles is examined in Dutch children with SLI in relation to specificity, new and given information and presence of mutual knowledge. Data were collected using a controlled elicitation experiment. Analyses looked at incorrect omission of articles and the substitution of definite articles by indefinites and vice versa. Both group and individual data were analyzed.

The pragmatics of definite and indefinite articles are described in Section 1.1. This is followed by an overview of relevant research on article use in Dutch children with TD (Section 1.2) and by the expected patterns of article use in Dutch SLI (Section 1.3). Section 1.4 ends with a brief summary of the goals, research questions and predictions for this study. Sections 2 and 3 report the method and the results, respectively, followed by the conclusions and further discussion in Section 4.

1.1. The pragmatics of definite and indefinite articles

Not all languages use articles but, as mentioned above, where they are used, an interaction is found between syntax and pragmatics. Syntactically, articles in combination with the noun phrase (NP) form a Determiner Phrase (DP) where the D head carries features determining definiteness (Ionin, 2003). In Dutch, as in English, an article is compulsory in singular contexts. Sentences (1a and b) are correct but (1c) is not.

1. a. Een schoen ontbreekt.
'A shoe is missing.'
- b. Schoenen zijn verplicht.
'Shoes must be worn.'
- c. *Schoen ontbreekt
 **Shoe is missing.'

Whether D in a singular DP should be realized as a definite or indefinite article is largely determined by pragmatic factors and this holds equally for both English and Dutch (Lyons, 1999; Rozendaal, 2008). These factors include the knowledge of the speaker and the listener about the referent denoted by the noun (specificity, mutual/world knowledge), and the presence or absence of the referent in the previous discourse (givenness). Fig. 1, adapted from Rozendaal and Baker (2008:776), summarizes these relevant pragmatic factors and the relationships between them. The contexts tested in the current study are marked in grey. In the discussion below, the examples are provided in English but the same distinctions apply to Dutch.

In Fig. 1, a first distinction is made between non-specific and specific reference. The choice between the two depends on whether the speaker (presumably) does or does not have a particular entity in mind when using a DP (Givón, 1995; Lyons, 1999). Non-specific referents are predominantly realized as indefinite DPs.¹ For example, the speaker in (2) does not have a particular car in mind and, therefore, a non-specific referent is realized as an indefinite DP.

¹ Non-specific reference can be expressed through a definite DP, e.g. generic reference predicating over a class of referents such as in 'The dodo is extinct' (Lyons, 1999). In general, these are not very frequent.

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