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Unravelling the complexity of Direct Object Scrambling

Jeannette Schaeffer

Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication, Dept. of Cultural Analysis & Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities,
University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 210, 1012 VT Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complexity of Direct Object Scrambling (DOS) by testing this phenomenon experimentally in three Dutch-speaking groups of children between the ages of 6 and 14: SLI, HFA, and TD (Specific Language Impairment, High Functioning Autism, and Typically Developing). First, the results show that, despite the failure to scramble in both pathological groups, the children with HFA do not display any morpho-syntactic deficits, whereas the children with SLI do. This suggests that the children with SLI and the children with HFA fail to scramble for different reasons. It is argued that children with SLI do this because of a problem with syntactic object placement, whereas children with HFA leave referential direct objects unscrambled because they fail to consistently integrate the different components of DOS. These results from two different pathological groups uncover different components in the complex phenomenon of DOS, at the interface of grammar (including (morpho-)syntax and semantics) and pragmatics: syntactic object placement, definiteness/referentiality, speaker/hearer beliefs, and information structure. Earlier work on DOS in younger, TD Dutch-acquiring children identifies another component of DOS, namely the pragmatic knowledge that speaker and hearer are always independent (Concept of Non-Shared Assumptions, Schaeffer, 2000). As such, the current study demonstrates the important contribution of acquisition research in TD as well as pathological populations to the unravelling and understanding of complex linguistic phenomena.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the complexity of Direct Object Scrambling (DOS) in Dutch from the perspective of impaired language acquisition. DOS concerns the placement of a direct object before or after an adverb or negation, as exemplified in (1)–(4):

- (1) Jan heeft **het boek** goed/niet gelezen - *scrambled*
John has the book well/not read
'John read the book well.' / 'John didn't read the book.'
- (2) ??Jan heeft goed/niet **het boek** gelezen (sentential negation) - *non-scrambled*
John has well/not the book read

E-mail address: j.c.schaeffer@uva.nl.

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- (3) Jan heeft **een boek** goed/niet gelezen (referential) - *scrambled*
 John has a book well/not read
 'John read a (certain)/one book well.' / 'John didn't read a (certain)/one book.'
- (4) Jan heeft goed/niet **een boek/geen boek** gelezen (non-referential) - *non-scrambled*
 John has well/not a book / no book read
 'John read a book (any book) well.' / 'John didn't read a (any) book.'

Referential objects tend to be scrambled, as illustrated in (1)–(3). In contrast, non-referential objects must remain unscrambled, as shown in (4). This will be further elaborated in section 2.

It is argued that children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and children with High Functioning Autism (HFA) both have problems with DOS, but for different reasons: children with SLI fail to scramble because of grammatical difficulties; children with HFA fail to scramble because of problems with the integration of information from different levels. This illuminates the complexity of DOS: it is a phenomenon at the interface of grammar and pragmatics, thus requiring knowledge of the relevant pragmatic and grammatical operations, plus the interaction between these different types of knowledge. I therefore propose a definition of complexity in terms of interface: the more interaction between language components the phenomenon involves, the more complex it is.

2. Background

2.1. The phenomenon of Direct Object Scrambling in adult Dutch

The examples in (1)–(3) suggest that it is the referentiality of direct objects that drives scrambling, i.e., the placement in a position preceding negation or an adverb. Before elaborating on the issue of scrambling it is necessary to define referentiality. For Fodor and Sag (1982) the most crucial property of referential nominal expressions is their “uniqueness”: a referential nominal refers to a unique entity in the world, which can be identified by someone. This “someone” is usually, but not necessarily, the speaker. Schaeffer (2000) proposes a definition of referentiality that is close to Fodor and Sag’s description, namely, a nominal expression is referential if it has a “fixed referent”, implying that it is known to the speaker and/or to someone whose propositional attitudes are being reported. This is stated in (5):

- (5) *Referentiality*
 A nominal expression is understood to be referential if it has a "fixed referent" in the (model of the) world, meaning that it can be identified by the speaker and/or by one of the people whose propositional attitudes are being reported.

Notice that referentiality is a semantic notion, i.e. it refers to the way a nominal expression is interpreted, or understood.

As hinted at in the definition in (5), and further elaborated on in Schaeffer and Matthewson (2005), like definiteness, referentiality is tied to the different states of speaker and hearer beliefs. Beliefs which are shared by all interlocutors in a discourse are said to be in the so-called COMMON GROUND of the discourse (see e.g. Stalnaker, 1974, 1978; Heim, 1982). The use of the definite article *the* requires the existence of a referent that is part of the shared beliefs between speaker and hearer, i.e. the COMMON GROUND. As such, noun phrases that have a referent in the COMMON GROUND are referential. As Schaeffer & Matthewson show, there are various ways for the existence of referents to become part of the COMMON GROUND, two of which are illustrated in (6).¹

- (6) a. This is a story about a girl. **The** girl lived in a big castle.
 b. **The** sun is shining today.

In (6a), the existence of a unique entity corresponding to the definite noun phrase *the girl* is part of the shared beliefs between speaker and hearer, i.e. the COMMON GROUND, because it was established in the previous discourse, namely by the indefinite noun phrase *a girl*. In (6b), the existence of a unique entity corresponding to the definite nominal expression *the sun* is likewise part of the COMMON GROUND, but for a different reason, namely that it is part of the long-term shared beliefs between speaker and hearer. The existence of the sun is always entailed by the COMMON GROUND and it need not be explicitly introduced in prior discourse.

¹ Note that there is another use of the definite article, namely the generic use, as in (i)

(i) The American citizen knows every insurance policy on the market.

As this use is not tested in the current study, it is not discussed here.

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