

The acquisition of discourse pragmatics: the case of personal pronouns

1. Background: accessibility in pronoun comprehension

With respect to nominal expressions, fine-grained hierarchies have been proposed reflecting the degree of discourse accessibility of the entity they refer to, be it in the verbal or non-verbal context. As such, there is a continuum from low to highly accessible referents to which the different types of nominal expressions are associated (Ariel 1990, Givón 1990, Gundel, Hedland, & Zacharski 1993). This continuum has been proposed for 3rd person pronouns: their antecedents are considered to have high discourse accessibility only when they have been mentioned very recently, are the topics of the conversation, and have few competing potential alternatives in the nearby context. Under such a view, 1st and 2nd person pronouns, having referents that are “physically” present in the real world, are to be considered highly accessible.

Accessibility theory may be claimed to also play a role with respect to the deficiency status of pronouns: strong pronouns are prosodically marked functional items (they carry a pitch accent, have an approximately 10% longer duration compared to their weak counterparts and are acoustically marked by a pause that separates them from the verb). They have an intended referent that is not in focus but is nevertheless familiar to the hearer and have an intermediate accessibility status. By contrast, weak pronouns are prosodically unmarked but have a highly accessible referent that is easily retrievable.

2. Aim

An important part of discourse comprehension depends on if and how antecedents are co-referred to. A clear relation is found between the type of nominal expression used (i.e. syntactic knowledge) and the information status of the antecedent (i.e. pragmatic knowledge). As such, children not only need to learn to generate different nominal expressions in the appropriate positions at the syntactic level, but also to identify the discourse information status, situating this particular skill at the syntax-pragmatics interface.

In this project, we intend to test two hypotheses with respect to the role of syntactic and pragmatic knowledge in the acquisition of personal pronouns:

1/ the natural order of acquisition of personal pronouns reflects their phonological deficiency irrespective of the cognitive information status of their intended referents

i.e. in spite of the cognitively highly accessible status of their antecedent, weak pronouns, due to their phonologically and morpho-syntactically deficient nature, are expected to be acquired after their strong counterparts. It is expected that weak pronouns, which are acoustically less prominent than their strong counterparts, will be more easily missed in incoming speech. As such, they will be acquired after their strong counterparts. This strong < weak acquisition pattern should be observed irrespective of the person features of pronouns.

2/ the natural order of acquisition of personal pronouns reflects the discourse accessibility status of their intended referents, irrespective of their phonological deficiency

i.e. different acquisition patterns are expected for 1st/2nd vs. 3rd person accusative pronouns, due to their different discourse accessibility. In the acquisition process, the reference tracking devices are at first mainly 1st and 2nd person pronouns, demonstratives, bare nouns as quasi proper names and 3rd person pronouns/clitics. Only later do children start adding the devices that perform reference tracking in (linguistic) discourse, showing a rise in the use of articles and 3rd person pronouns/clitics. Under this hypothesis, 1st/2nd person pronouns should therefore be acquired before their 3rd person counterparts, regardless of phonological deficiency.

3. Method

Two well-documented comprehension tasks (Gerken & Shady 1996, Gordon 1996) will be used to test these two hypotheses. Both tasks test the comprehension of pronominal relations. Children will be confronted with a linguistic and two or more visual stimuli. The linguistic stimuli contain 1st and 3rd person accusative strong, weak and clitic pronouns. The linguistic stimuli are matched with one of two types of visual stimuli. Task 1 is a *picture selection task*, a multiple-choice comprehension task of the forced-choice type, forcing selection from a closed set of four items. Task 2 is a *truth value judgment task* in which the subject is requested to judge whether there is a match or mismatch between the linguistic and visual stimuli that are presented. Finally, similar sets of pictures will be used in a *pronoun elicitation task*, to elicitate the production of 2nd and 3rd person personal pronouns.

Participants: 2 x 10 typically developing 3 year old children who are monolingual native speakers of Romanian (Larisa Avram) and Dutch (Martine Coene).