

An incremental approach to referential accessibility in mother-child conversation

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Previous studies have shown that young children are sensitive to a variety of accessibility features of referents (e.g., whether the referent has been mentioned in prior discourse) when using referential expressions in spontaneous interaction (e.g., Allen, 2000; Guerriero, et al., 2006). However, most of these studies focused on the effect of these features in isolation, without taking into account the circumstances that these features may interact with each other and that children may attend to the effect of this interaction. While a few recent studies (e.g., Hughes and Allen, 2015) have begun to address this issue, more systematic studies of typologically different languages are needed. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether an incremental effect of accessibility can be observed in the speech of Mandarin-speaking children and mothers.

The data consisted of eight hours of natural conversation of two Mandarin-speaking mother-child dyads, collected when the children were between the ages of 2;2 and 3;1. The subject and object arguments of the children's and the mothers' utterances were coded for the categories of referential forms (null, pronominal, and nominal) and accessibility features (absence, newness, query, contrast, differentiation in context, differentiation in discourse, inanimacy, third person, and joint attention). The degree of incremental accessibility was determined by accessibility scores, which were calculated according to the numbers of features accessible for the referents mentioned.

The results showed that both the children and the mothers were influenced by the degree of incremental accessibility when choosing referential forms. They used an increasing number of informative forms (i.e., nominal forms) as the referents became less accessible, and vice versa. In other words, the Mandarin-speaking mothers and their children (since they were as young as 2;2) demonstrated the sensitivity to the incremental effects of accessibility. The results extend previous findings about incremental sensitivity in Inuktitut and English to Mandarin Chinese, a language of a very different typology. The results are further discussed in relation to the role of communicative informativeness and the development of Theory of Mind in children's acquisition of reference.

References

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