Child sensitivity to two different discourse cues
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Studies on children’s acquisition of pronouns have shown us a lot about children’s knowledge of categorical syntactic and semantic rules, such as Principle B (ex. Chien & Wexler 1990) and the interpretation of person and number features (Ricard et al. 1999, Legendre et al. 2011, among many others). Yet, while Principle B rules out certain antecedents, and phi-features rule others in, context frequently provides more than one suitable candidate. In such cases, adults rely on discourse cues, which are probabilistic in nature. By studying these probabilistic cues we can learn something about the nature of the developing grammar.

Here I examine Spanish-speaking children’s developing sensitivity to two such cues: (i) the semantic relation between the clause containing the pronoun and the preceding clause, and (ii) the form of the pronoun itself. Using a forced-choice picture selection task, I probe children and adults’ interpretations of null versus overt subject pronouns in short, two-sentence discourses narrating either sequentially (1) or causally (2) related events.

(1) Pedro patea a Jorge y después {ø/el} se va. Pedro kicks Jorge and then {ø/he} leaves.
(2) Pedro patea a Jorge y por eso {ø/el} se va. Pedro kicks Jorge and therefore {ø/he} leaves.

Discourses that narrate a sequence of events are argued to exhibit topic continuity (Asher & Lascarides 2003, Kehler 2002), and hence, pronouns in topic position will tend to refer to the preceding topic (the preceding subject in 1-2). In contrast, discourses relating causally linked events favor whichever pronoun interpretation is consistent with real-world knowledge of those events and their causes (in the example above, as in all test items, this was the preceding object). Independent of this, null pronouns have been shown to prefer antecedents in subject position while overt subject pronouns do not (Carminatti 2002, Alonso-Ovalle et al. 2002). Our adult results indicate that each cue exhibits a separate main effect (clausal relation: F(1,38)=22.1, p<0.001, F(2,15)=26.8, p<0.005; null/overt: F(1,38)=11.6, p<0.002, F(2,15)=17.5, p<0.009).

Both of these cues require the ability to track referents across discourse. The first is semantic in nature and requires the ability to identify topics and perform pragmatic reasoning. The second is structural in nature and requires the ability to identify subjects and non-subjects. A priori, we might expect this latter cue to be acquired earlier; however, child results indicate the opposite. Children 4 ½ years and younger show sensitivity to the manipulation of discourse relation, while older children show sensitivity to the null/overt distinction.

These results are in line with other research demonstrating sensitivity to probabilistic discourse cues among pre-schoolers (Song & Fisher 2005, Hartshorne & Snedecker 2015). However, the fact that older children seem to ignore a cue that younger children are sensitive to suggests that it takes longer for children to learn integrate these cues together, perhaps due to limitations on processing capacity. Finally, all children showed an overall greater preference for object antecedents as compared to adults, suggesting either that (i) they have an overall bias towards a causal interpretation, or that (ii) they have trouble suppressing the more recently mentioned object antecedent. I leave this possibility to future research.


