

MSU Language Acquisition Lab

Spring 2008

NEWS

Learning the Definite Article

The definite article (*the*) in English is a little word, whose meaning is not easy to describe, even though it is among the most frequently used words in the language.

How do children learn what the definite article (*the*) means? At what age do they know the same about the definite as adults do? To answer these questions we first need to know how the definite works for adults.

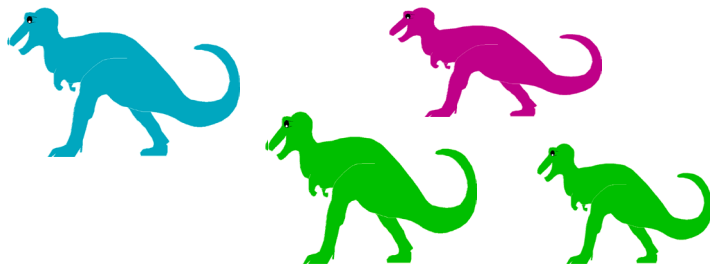
Understanding the definite

The definite article in English combines with a noun to pick out some unique object in the discourse. For example, if we look at the picture below, we can say the following sentences:

Look at the dinosaurs!

Look at the green dinosaurs!

Look at the blue dinosaur!



However, looking at the same picture, here are some sentences that we wouldn't say:

**The dinosaur is purple.*

**The dinosaurs are green.*

These sentences sound odd because the definite determiner must pick out a unique object or set of objects in the context. Since there is more than one dinosaur in the picture, we don't use the definite with a singular noun here. When we use the plural noun, we must pick out a unique set, which in this case must be all the dinosaurs.

Testing what children know

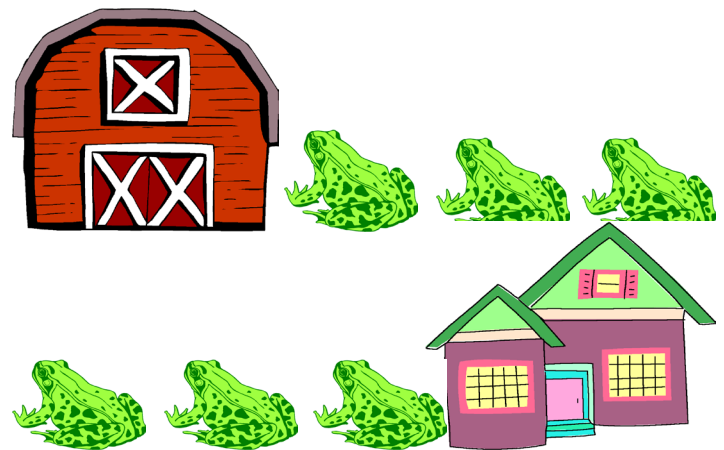
Researchers at the MSU Language Acquisition Lab were interested in understanding how and when young children learn these properties of the definite article. We constructed an experiment that tested whether children knew the uniqueness property of the definite when used with both plural and singular nouns. To do this, we used toy animals and a house and a barn as

shown in the picture below. We then asked the children to do one of the following:

Give me the frog next to the barn!

Give me the frogs next to the barn!

As you can tell if you follow the instructions yourself, for the first request, you would give the frog closest to the barn, while for the second request, you would give all of the frogs next to the barn.



What did we learn?

We discovered that although the children (3-5 years old) give all of the frogs in the second request, they often give the frog closest to them instead of the frog closest to the barn in response to the first request. This shows that although young children know most of the properties of the definite, they still have some problems integrating its use in certain contexts. This is all part of normal development, however.

Where can I learn more?

The results of this experiment were published in the Proceedings of the Boston University Conference on Language Development. You can download the whole paper the Acquisition Lab website.

Participating schools

Eastminster Child Development Center; Happy Elephant Daycare, Flint; MSU Child Development Laboratories; Montessori Center of East Lansing; Okemos Kids Club at Chippewa Middle School; Centro de Desarrollo Infantil (CENDI), Mexico City.

Focus on Focus

In English, we often put extra stress on words in a sentence to give them emphasis. In linguistics this process is called *focus* and has very subtle effects on our interpretations of sentences. To understand how linguistic focus works, think of what the following two sentences mean when you say them out loud (where the capital letters mark the word that is emphasized.)

Sam only eats GREEN eggs and ham.

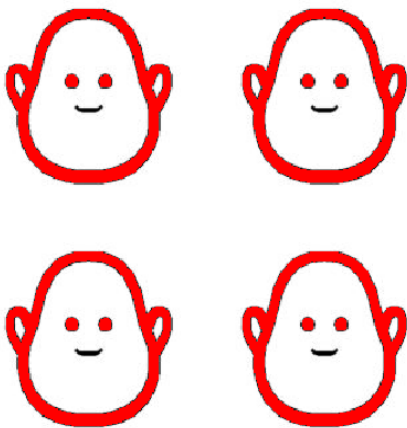
Sam only eats green eggs and HAM.

We interpret the first sentence to mean that Sam eats green eggs and ham, but not brown eggs or white eggs or yellow eggs. We interpret the second sentence to mean that Sam eats green eggs and ham, but not green eggs and bacon or green eggs and sausage. By putting emphasis on specific words we bring to mind other words that would fit into the same slot in the sentence. It's the contrast between these other words and the word we focus that gives us the impression of emphasis.

Do children understand focus?

Many researchers have found that young children have

difficulties understanding this kind of focus. Researchers at the MSU Acquisition Lab were interested in seeing whether children were able to use focus to bring out particular meanings of the words like *some*. We gave children pictures of



faces without mouths as in the picture and asked them to do the following:

Make SOME faces happy

Make some faces HAPPY

Make some HAPPY faces

What would you do in this situation? Most adults made all the faces happy in response to the third sentence, but made fewer than all the faces happy in the first two sentences. For the first sentence, this is due to the fact that when we focus *some* we bring to mind all the things that are like some but not the same; in particular, we bring to mind “not all”. In the case of the third sentence *some* is not focused, and so we

don't need to enforce the “some, but not all” meaning.

What did children do?

Children behaved like adults on the first and the second sentence, but behaved differently on the second sentence, filling in all of the faces about half the time. These results show two things. First, although children sometimes have problems with focus, they are able to use the focus on *some* to create the “not all” meaning of the sentence. Second, they understand that the unfocused *some* in the third sentence doesn't mean “some but not all”. However, in contexts like the second sentence, where the *some* is not focused, they treat this *some* more like the unstressed *some* in the third sentence. These new results show that not all instances of focus cause difficulties for children.

Where can I learn more?

The results of this research were published in the Proceedings of the Boston University Conference on Language Development. You can read the whole paper here <<http://www.msu.edu/linguist/acquisition/papers/BU-CLD29.pdf>> at the Acquisition Lab web site.

Participating schools

Eastminster Child Development Center; MSU Child Development Laboratories.

New NSF Funding

The MSU Acquisition Lab is pleased to announce that its work investigating the effects of language variation on the acquisition of Spanish in Mexico and Chile has been funded by the National Science Foundation. This project is a collaborative project being conducted by Cristina Schmitt at MSU and Karen Miller at Calvin College (and an Acquisition Lab alumna). Congratulations!

About the Lab

The MSU Acquisition Lab does research in child first language acquisition, with a focus on the acquisition of sentence structure and meaning, and the comparison of acquisition pattern in many languages including Spanish, Portuguese., English, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

Faculty: Cristina Schmitt, Alan Munn

Contact: 517-353-9945 or 517-353-6762

Web: www.msu.edu/~linguist/acquisition