Morpho-syntactic cues for distributivity in Serbian

Ana Bosnić
University of Groningen/ University of Nantes

Background

1. Three clowns are holding two presents.

1a. Collective

1b. Distributive

- Numerically quantified sentences have two prominent interpretations: collective (1a) and distributive (1b).

- English and Serbian acceptance rates are significantly different:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Serbian morphological system is more complex than English. Serbian children acquire distributive markers much later (age 8-9).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Acceptance Rate (Adults: Children)</td>
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<td>5 years</td>
<td>82.8% : 38.2%</td>
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</tbody>
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- Serbian has several types of numerals and it shows a subject-verb agreement mismatch in environments with numerically quantified expressions. These factors may account for the disparity in English and Serbian child and adult results.

2. Serbian mismatch

- Paucals (numerals 2,3 and 4) + paucal case
- 2. Tri klovna vs. *Tri klovnova
- Three, pauc clown. pauc (sg.gen) vs *Three, pauc clown. pl.gen

Collective (mixed gender) + plural case

- 3. Troje dece vs *Troje deleta
- Three, mixed child.pl.gen vs *Three, mixed child.sg.gen (pauc)

Paucals and mixed-gender numerals show verbal agreement mismatch (allow both sg and pl):

4. Troje dece drži/drže kutiju.
- Three, mixed children.gen.pl hold.sg /hold.pl box.acc

“Three children are holding a box.”

Naturalness study

\[ pl = m summary \]

Methods

Two Truth Value Judgment Task

2x2 study, 24 items & 24 control items x 4 lists, balanced design

Pausal experiment:
38 Serbian non-linguist adults (MA: 26.9) and 25 native Serbian children (MA: 7.6)

Mixed-gender experiment:
32 Serbian non-linguist adults (MA: 25.1) and 24 native Serbian children (MA: 7.7)

The factors tested were the influence of Number (singular and plural verbal agreement) and Collective/Distributive Interpretations.

Research question

How, and to what degree, do subject-verb agreement mismatches influence Serbian interpretation preferences of numerically quantified sentences?

Results

1) Adults understand numerically quantified sentences without distributive markers as scalar/conversational implicatures.

- Since there is a better alternative to convey a distributive message (using each, or in the case of Serbian – a distributive marker po), numerically quantified sentences must be collective. (Pagliarini et al, 2012)

2) Some children had a problem to interpret singular indefinite objects as conceptually plural. This was a motivation to reject distributive pictures in the Pausal experiment, which contrasts current empirical and theoretical data.

Future work:

- Hypothesis: complex morpho-syntactic system of Serbian is loading children’s working memory, and it is affecting the processing of such ambiguous sentences.

- Proposed test: unloading the working memory will change children’s choices and make them more adult-like.

- Following Van Rij et al., (2009) – slowed-down speech rate

References


Contact: a.bosnic@rug.nl