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Publication date:
2015

Citation for published version (APA):

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Morpho-syntactic cues for distributivity in Serbian
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Background

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

1. Three clowns are holding two presents.

1a. Collective

1b. Distributive

- English and Serbian acceptance rates are significantly different:

Serbian morphological system is more complex than English. Serbian children acquire distributive markers much later (age 8-9).

- 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.

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

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

Serbian non-linguist adults (MA: 25.1) and 24 native Serbian children (MA: 7.7)

2 Serbian mismatch

Paucals (numerals 2, 3 and 4) + paucal case

2. Tri kloven vs.*Tri klovenja

Three pauc. clown, pauc. (sg.gen) vs *Three pauc. clown, pl.gen

Collective (mixed gender) + plural case

3. Troje dece vs *Troje deteta

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

Paucal experiment:

Mixed-gender experiment:

Two Truth Value Judgment Task

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

3 Methods

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

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

4 Results

5 Discussion

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 Pauca 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