Morpho-syntactic cues for distributivity in Serbian

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1. Background

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

1a. Three clowns are holding two presents.

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).

- Bosnian must and implicatures and environments distributive collective system has sentences quantified of account are collective models kutiju verb each are quantified loading there distributive had problem have child.sg.gen marker s This the child. a children current and mixed a clowns or – children's current and Agreement mismatches in observations

2. Serbian mismatch

Paucals (numerals 2.3 and 4) + paucal case
2. Tri klovna vs. *Tri klovona
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

Pausal experiment: Mixed-gender experiment:

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)

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

3. Methods

Two Truth Value Judgment Task
2x2 study, 24 items & 24 control items x 4 lists, balanced design

4. 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 Paucal 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

Research question:

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

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5. Discussion

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References


