Acquisition studies have documented several patterns of non-adultlike interpretations of telic sentences. Providing a consistent picture of children’s interpretations across languages is not easy, for at the surface, they seem to defy a common cause. This talk aims to provide such a unified account.

In one type of pattern, children attribute ‘incomplete event interpretations’ to perfective telic sentences more often than adults (van Hout, 1998, 2008 on Dutch and English; Garcia del Real 2015 on Spanish). In contrast, learners of Slavic languages show a mirror image pattern and attribute ‘complete event interpretations’ to imperfective telic sentences significantly more often than adults (Kazanina & Phillips 2007 on Russian; van Hout 2008 on Polish). This latter pattern is also found in Mandarin Chinese and English, although in a different guise. Mandarin Chinese children tend to interpret monomorphemic change-of-state verbs in perfective sentences as entailing rather than implying a change of state in contrast to adults (Chen 2016). In a similar way, Kazanina et al. (under review) have shown that English children interpret perfective sentences with ditransitive verbs like *send* as if they entailed a change of state, while these verbs only imply it in adult English.

Given the diversity of non-adultlike interpretations, an account purely in terms of language-independent cognitive principles does not suffice. We defend the idea that, despite their apparent diversity, all three patterns of non-adultlike interpretations of telic sentences reflect one and the same cause: the learner’s difficulty to grasp the contextual and pragmatic restrictions bearing on the non-primary (auxiliary) interpretation of unmarked forms. The effect is that, cross-linguistically, in child languages, the auxiliary interpretation appears in contexts where adults select the default interpretation.

References:


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