

The Child's Acquisition of English Articles

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ABSTRACT

This study is designed to investigate English morphemes and the order of acquisition of these morphemes by children learning English as their first language. In particular, it examines and describes the acquisition of English articles *the* and *a*. The data used for analysis are downloaded from CHILDES. It analyzes the speech of Eve, one of the subjects of Brown (1963). The study reveals, among others, that English articles' acquisition is gradual and fluctuates.

KEYWORDS

*Morpheme; speech;
acquisition; learning; article;
communication*

INTRODUCTION

Zalewski (1993, 691) reported that some researchers argue that errors in morphology do not affect comprehension. However, the researcher noticed that these errors could frustrate learners and have bad effects on their learning process. Zalewski (ibid, 698-699) emphasized that "every language feature is potentially important to communication." We should study these errors because they are committed a lot by learners. Brown (1973: 260-262) stated that errors in the use of the third person singular morphemes "constitute partially distinct learning problems." Also, Brown stressed the fact that "several grammatical processes are lumped together under plurals." The acquisition of English grammatical morphemes by first language learners has attracted the attention of many linguists.

Researchers devoted much of their work to prove that learners acquire English grammatical morphemes in almost the same order. Brown (1973, 274) discussed the acquisition order of fourteen morphemes. Brown concluded that there is a natural order of morpheme acquisition by learners. For example, the English articles ranked six and the third person singular present morpheme ranked ten. Inspired and helped by Brown, Berko (1958, 150-171) studied the use of English morphemes. The researcher concluded that boys and girls performed equally in the use of morphemes although some researchers reported that girls usually do better in the use of morphemes. According to Berko, this is not true. A question that has been under investigation by researchers is when we know that a child has acquired a specific morpheme. Berko (ibid: 150) stated that a child acquires a morpheme if he/she is able to use it correctly. However, Berko did not give more explanation about a specific age or percentage of the correct use that marks acquisition. Brown (quoted in Tager-Flusberg, 1997, 178-179) pointed out that a morpheme is acquired when it is used or supplied appropriately in 90% of 'the obligatory contexts' in spontaneous speech.

Most of the studies about the acquisition of articles and other morphemes focused mostly on its acquisition as a second language. It seems to me that the study of articles has not recently attracted the attention of first language researchers. Most of the studies are old (Christopherson, 1939; Hewson, 1972; Krasmy, 1972). Zehler and Brewer (1982, 1268-1274) shed light on the sequence and principles of the English articles use. They examined data from both adults and 2-3 years children. Their study revealed, among others, that children have a tendency to overuse the definite article *the* after the acquisition of both the definite and indefinite articles. Tager-Flusberg (1997, 178-180) discussed Brown's explanation of the order of English morphemes. Brown pointed out that despite the fact that articles are the most frequent used morpheme in the spontaneous speech of parents, the articles are not among the first acquired morphemes.

This study proceeds as follows: Section 2 states the objectives of the study. Section 3 discusses data elicitation whereas section 4 deals with the results and discussion. Conclusions are in section 5.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study examines the acquisition of articles. In particular, it aims to:

- 1- Describe the use of both the definite and definite English articles by two year old children.
- 2- Answer the question: Which article is acquired first: the definite or the indefinite?

DATA ELICITATION AND THE SUBJECT

The data are transcripts of an hour of the spontaneous production which were elicited by making a spontaneous communication between adults and a child called Eve. For the purpose of this study, the speech of Eve, one of Brown's subjects, was downloaded from the CHILDES website. The researcher examined the data recorded when she was exactly 2 years old. Her speech was read carefully to locate those utterances or sentences in which the articles were used. These uses were calculated and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are obtained from data downloaded from CHILDES. Particularly, the findings are based on the analysis of the spontaneous speech of Eve who is 2 years old. The number of occurrences of articles (*the*, *a* and *an*) in the recorded data is 72 times. However, this number does not include the 24 occurrences which Eve should have used them, but she chose not to.

Thus we can claim that the overall number of article occurrences in the data is 96. Table 1 shows the number of the correct occurrences of each article.

Table .1 Number of articles occurrences in Eve's speech

| | The indefinite article <i>a</i> | The indefinite article <i>an</i> | The definite article <i>the</i> |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| No. of occurrences | 47 | 2 | 23 |

Table 2 shows the number of occurrences in which Eve missed the use of article (null use).

Table .2 The number of null use of articles in Eve's speech

| | The indefinite article <i>a</i> | The indefinite article <i>an</i> | The definite article <i>the</i> |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| No. of occurrences | 8 | 1 | 15 |

Discussing the data in depth, the researcher found that the subject (Eve) used the articles appropriately in 75% of their obligatory contexts. This leaves us with 25% for the none use of articles. Taking in consideration that these data were elicited when Eve was 2 years old, this finding seems to be reasonable. According to means length utterance or MLU (Tager-Flusberg, 1997) she was at the end of stage 1 and the beginning of stage 2 of her syntactical and morphological development. Thus Eve was moving from the telegraphic stage which marks stage 1 to the use of inflection and morphemes which signals stage 2. Eve's 75% means that she is almost near the 90% which Brown stated as a criterion to judge the acquisition of a morpheme.

Going more in depth with these results stated in the tables above, we can reveal more interesting findings. Examining each article alone (I will not discuss *an* as its occurrences are not indicative),

would suggest that:

1- The article *a* should have occurred 55 times. The appropriate use of *a* is 47 times whereas it is missing in 8 times. This indicates that it was used correctly in 85.4% of the overall use of *a*.

2- The article *the* should have occurred in 38 times. The correct use of *the* is 23 times. While it is missing in 15 times. This means that the article *the* is used correctly 60.5% of the overall use of *the*.

There is a question that arises in trying to understand these percentages: what do these percentages tell us? Investigating them would suggest that there is an internal order of acquisition within the acquisition of each morpheme. This is reflected through the higher percentage of the correct use of *a*. This doesn't mean that *the* is not acquired rather than the article *a* is acquired faster first.

The data reveal that even if Eve was corrected by the examiner or her mother, she would repeat some sentences without paying attention to the correct use of articles as in the following extract:

*CHI: *where big round cook?*
*MOT: *you be real good #.*
*MOT: *is that what you say ?*
*CHI: *big round cook ./+ RES]*
*MOT: *oh the big round cook.*
*MOT: *no # that's not the big round cook .*
*CHI: *where big round cook?*

As can be noted, Eve used null article where an article is needed. Although of the mother correction, Eve insisted on repeating the sentence with null article.

Studying more data, on the other hand, reveals that Eve may use an article appropriately. Nevertheless, she may miss its use when repeating the same sentence as can be inferred from the following extract:

*CHI: */ making [/] making a house building .*
*COL: *you're making what ?*
*CHI: *I making house building ./+ RES/*
*MOT: *oh # a house building ?*

These findings indicate that acquisition of articles is not a clear-cut one. Although articles are acquired by Eve, their appearance is fluctuate. In the extract, Eve could use the correct article in the correct position. However, since she has not acquired this morpheme completely yet, she misused it when repeating the same sentence.

CONCLUSION

As it has been shown by findings discussed in section 4, the study concludes that at the age of two:

1. The correct use of articles is more than the incorrect one.
2. Children do not have a full acquisition of articles.
3. Children acquires the indefinite article *a* faster than the definite article *the*
4. The acquisition of articles- as in the case of other English morphemes- is gradual.
5. The acquisition of articles – as m the case of other English morphemes - fluctuates.

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