Semantic Components in Children's Errors with Pronouns

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In the presence of the experimenter and two dolls, children were asked to respond to sentences containing pronouns which required distinctions to be made on the basis of person, number, and gender, such as "Point to my (your, his, her, our, their) feet." Errors tended to maintain distinctions; for example, we was treated as if it meant I (maintaining first person) or they (maintaining plural) more often than could be accounted for by a response-bias model. Furthermore, there were consistent individual differences in the kinds of distinctions that were difficult; some subjects had more trouble with number, others with person. These findings support the notion that errors made during acquisition result from dropping only part of the correct meaning, and they suggest that individuals may differ in the relative strengths of different components.

INTRODUCTION

Considerable evidence (see Clark, 1973a,b; Baron, 1973) suggests that word concepts are acquired one component at a time. For example, Donaldson and Wales (1970) found that many young children assimilate shorter to longer, less to more, lowest to highest, etc. While these children seem to understand that each term is a comparative adjective, they treat each "negative" term as if it were its corresponding positive term. This phenomenon may be the result of

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1This paper presents the same data and conclusions as our presentation at the Psychonomic Society meetings, November 1973, but our analysis has changed somewhat.


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having acquired some components of the negative term, but not that which
distinguishes it from its corresponding positive term (H. Clark, 1970; E.
Clark, 1973a; Baron, 1973). Another example is Clark's (1971) demonstration
that some children go through a stage in which they take after to mean
before. Here the children understand that after refers to the relative times of
two events, but do not seem to have acquired the component which
distinguishes it from before. On the basis of these findings, Clark suggested
that the components of these terms were acquired in a fixed order for all
children.

An alternative explanation of these findings is that the child in fact
acquires the meanings of each term all at once. When the child does not know
the meaning he is biased—by the context and the situation—toward the use of
certain strategies which happen to correspond to the correct response for one
of the terms. For example, in Donaldson and Wales' (1970) experiment, the
child might be biased toward the longer of two lines. Likewise, in Clark's
(1971) study, the child might treat any unknown term as if it indicated the
later of two events. In a study of children's understanding of in, on, and
under, Clark (1973b) seems in fact to favor an explanation of her results in
terms of biases toward certain strategies.

Thus one critical question seems to be whether errors represent total
ignorance, with biased guessing, at the time of testing, or whether errors can
in fact represent preservation of some components while others are missed. It
is this question that is addressed here.

The English personal pronouns are well suited for a test of this issue,
since they are distinguished from one another by several components. If we
were treated as if it meant they, for example, this error would preserve the
plural component. Likewise, assimilation of I to he would preserve the
singular component. If componential information is preserved, we would
expect these sorts of errors to be more common than I to they and we to he
errors, but we would not expect this if errors were determined by response
bias alone.

In this study, children, in the presence of two dolls, who represented
the third person, were asked to do things which required understanding of a
particular pronoun, such as "Point to their feet." We assume that the
pronouns have the following components, where S stands for singular; P for

4H. Clark (1970) proposes that the negative term is first assimilated to the positive term
because the child does not use either term "contrastively," and the nominal use is
treated as positive in all cases. This differs from the present account, which holds that
the assimilation of negative to positive is due to late acquisition of an "antonym"
component rather than a "contrastive sense." This account may explain more easily why
similar assimilations occur in terms without a nominal sense, such as above and below.
But at present we know of no evidence which can settle the issue.