An Alternative Assessment of Children’s Comprehension of Relative Clauses

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Methodological difficulties are identified in the assessment of children’s comprehension of relative clauses (RCs) by means of the standard acting-out procedure. An alternative experimental task is proposed which attempts to minimize these difficulties while exploring the advantages of the acting-out technique. An experiment is reported in which Portuguese-speaking 3- to 6-year olds were tested by means of this alternative task. The results show children being affected by both the position and the focus of the RC in the same way adults have been reported to be and an error analysis suggests that most of children’s difficulties can be ascribed to memory overload while RCs are processed as noun modifier sentences. These results contradict the view that there are developmental differences with regard to the way sentences with RCs are parsed and that processing load induces errors particularly manifested in right-branching subject focus sentences. Developmental changes taking place between the ages of 3 and 6 are considered and questions are raised concerning development from the age of 5.

INTRODUCTION

Relative clauses (RCs) can be defined as “sentences” functioning as restrictive or nonrestrictive modifiers. The recursive rules that generate RCs account for the unlimited human capacity of expanding noun phrases (NPs) by means of sentences with an adjectival function—an ability which is crucial in the creation of referring expressions and in the interweaving of proposi-

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tions in discourse. RCs are, therefore, a fundamental acquisition in the process of linguistic development.

The production of noun modifiers by means of sentences is an early achievement in this process. Two- and three-year-olds have been reported to produce RCs, despite being sometimes unsure of the function (wh-) word that should introduce these sentences (Corrêa, 1986; Labelle, 1990; Limber, 1973, 1976; Menyuk, 1969). The bulk of the experimental data suggests, however, that the comprehension of RCs poses difficulties which are hardly overcome before late childhood (see Bowerman, 1979; Corrêa, 1986; Hakuta, 1981, for reviews).

Most studies into children’s comprehension of RCs have dealt with children from 3 to 6 years of age. These data pose, however, difficulties for a developmental theory. Either children’s performance was shown not to differ significantly between these ages (Tavakolian, 1981) or the age differences obtained did not correspond to an approximation to the “adult standard” (Sheldon, 1974; De Villiers, Flusberg, Hakuta, & Cohen, 1979). In fact, the response patterns most commonly identified from the ages of 3 to 6 could also be observed in the responses of 9-year-olds under similar conditions (Fluck, 1977, 1978).

The difficulty that the comprehension of RCs apparently presents to children has given rise to a number of interpretations (see Bowerman, 1979; Clancy, Lee, & Zoh, 1986; Corrêa, 1986; Hakuta, 1981). Some have argued that sentence embedding is one of the grammatical aspects whose mastery involves a gradual process of maturation more accurately captured by children’s comprehension rather than by their production abilities (Menyuk, 1969; Tavakolian, 1981). Others would ascribe children’s difficulties in comprehending RCs to the inadequacy of the strategies they rely upon in face of the specificity of RC constructions (De Villiers et al., 1979; Hakuta, 1981; Prideaux, 1982; Sheldon, 1974). More recent data have, however, suggested that methodological difficulties in the way children’s comprehension abilities have been traditionally assessed might have prevented children from either correctly parsing the test sentences (Goodluck & Tavakolian, 1982) or deploying the semantic/pragmatic knowledge which would enable them to comprehend sentences with RCs even before a full grammatical knowledge was acquired (Hamburger & Crain, 1982).

This article aims at discussing further the methodological problems that the assessment of children’s ability to comprehend RCs has presented (as a particular case of the methodological problems presented by the standard experimental procedures for the assessment of children’s language comprehension abilities) and to provide a preliminary picture of the development of the ability to comprehend RCs. An experimental task is proposed which attempts to minimize the methodological difficulties identified in previous