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THE COMPREHENSION OF DOUBLY NEGATED SENTENCES IN DUTCH BY CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL LANGUAGE DISORDER

A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT
Sentences containing two negative constituents, such as the English example *He hasn't eaten nothing*, will give rise to different interpretations in different languages: in some languages, the two negations will cancel each other out and lead to a positive interpretation, whereas other languages will treat double negation as reinforcement of negation, thus maintaining a negative meaning. Young children acquiring a language belonging to the former category of languages have been found to go through a stage of non-adultlike interpretations of doubly negated sentences (Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2022; Thornton et al., 2016). However, studies on the acquisition of double negation comprehension have been confined to children with a typical language development (TLD). How their peers with developmental language disorder (DLD) compare, is under-researched. The present article therefore proposes a study on the comprehension of Dutch sentences with two negative markers by 5- and 8-year-old children with TLD and DLD using a Truth Value Judgment Task (TVJT). Investigating whether adultlike interpretations of such sentences are available to young children will provide an interesting way of assessing the development of this relatively little studied part of negation in both typically developing children and those with DLD.

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 Double negation and negative concord

For sentences containing two negative constituents, languages differ as to the interpretation this gives rise to. In some languages, including many Romance languages (De Swart & Sag, 2002) such as Romanian (Iordăchioaia & Richter, 2015), and some Slavic languages such as Russian (Garzonio, 2019), the presence of two negated elements in a sentence leads to the interpretation of a single negation, which is referred to as negative concord (NC). Example (1) illustrates NC in Italian.

(1) *Gianni non ha telefonato a nessuno*
Gianni NEG has called to NEG-body
'Gianni didn't call anybody'
(Zeijlstra, 2022, as cited in Zeijlstra, 2023)

For other languages, two negative elements in a sentence cancel each other out, leading to a positive interpretation. Examples of such languages include Dutch and German (Driemel et al., 2023), which will be referred to as double negation (DN) languages. Example (2) demonstrates DN in Dutch.

(2) *Het meisje heeft niet niemand gezien*
The girl has not nobody seen
'The girl has not seen nobody' (meaning 'The girl has seen somebody')

English occupies an interesting position: while Standard English is considered to be DN, certain varieties of English do allow for NC interpretations. This includes most notably African American English (Pullum, 1999). Adult speakers would therefore typically interpret the sentence in (3) as (3a) in Standard English, but as (3b) in NC-varieties of English.

(3) He hasn't eaten nothing
a. He has eaten something
b. He has eaten nothing

1.2 Acquisition of double negation interpretations

Considering Standard English's status as a DN-language, adult speakers of Standard English are expected to interpret sentences with two negative items as positive. However, is the same true for children acquiring Standard English? Several studies suggest that young children might go through a stage where their interpretation of doubly negated sentences is non-adultlike. For instance, Thornton et al. (2016) investigated Standard English-speaking adults' and 3- to 5-year-old children's interpretations of sentences containing two negative items, such as the example in (4).

(4) The girl who skipped didn't buy nothing.
(Thornton et al., 2016)

The authors found that, as expected, the adults overwhelmingly produced answers consistent with a DN interpretation. However, the children's responses mainly contained NC interpretations. A possible explanation could be that children's processing capacities are simply too limited to process a sentence with two negations (Thornton et al., 2016). However, the inclusion of control items such as (5) in Thornton et al.'s (2016) experiment demonstrated that this was not the case: while these items have two negative elements, they only allow for one interpretation since both negated constituents appear in different syntactic structures (as opposed to the experimental example in (4), in which both negated constituents are part of the same syntactic structure). Children achieved high levels of accuracy on the control items, indicating that they are able to process sentences with two negations.

(5) The girl who didn't skip bought nothing.
(Thornton et al., 2016)

Thornton et al. (2016) therefore conclude that processing limitations do not seem to explain children's non-adultlike performance on sentences with two negations, and suggest as an alternative explanation that children start out with a negative concord parameter (Zeijlstra, 2004, as cited in Thornton et al., 2016) set to a default of NC-interpretations for doubly negated sentences. Thornton et al. (2016) hypothesize that the parameter will be reset to a DN-setting at a later stage when children have gathered sufficient indirect negative evidence, since NC-interpretations are absent in the speech of adult speakers of Standard English.

Further support for this notion is provided by Maldonado and Culbertson (2021), who conducted a study with an artificial language paradigm with adult speakers of English. Their aim was to examine whether the structure of the negation marker in a language (e.g., an adverb or an affix) determines if the language is DN or NC. While they did not find evidence for this hypothesis, they uncovered that NC-languages were easier to acquire than DN-languages, regardless of the nature of the negation marker. The authors suggest that this could be support for the idea that NC is the default parameter setting.

A possible confound in the studies described above could be that while Standard English is DN, some varieties are NC, meaning that speakers of Standard English likely come into contact with NC use of English as well. This might mean that NC-interpretations are more accessible to speakers of English compared to speakers of other DN-languages, therefore weakening the idea that NC is truly ungrammatical as well as the claim that NC is the default parameter setting. To combat this issue, one should turn to studies on 'true' DN-languages that only allow DN-interpretations, such as German and Dutch, as this offers a clean distinction between adults' DN-interpretations and children's potential (default) NC-interpretations. Such research is, however, sparse. A notable exception is a study by Nicolae and Yatsushiro (2022), who demonstrated that 4- to 6-year-old children acquiring German also interpret doubly negated sentences as containing one negation, similarly to English-speaking children. The authors also suggest that NC is the default parameter setting. Further evidence for children's non-adultlike interpretations of negation can be found in work by Van Kampen (2023), who used corpus data to investigate the production of sentences containing universal quantifiers and negation (e.g., "All children don't like spinach"; Van Kampen, 2023) in children aged 3;0-5;5. In adult Dutch, such sentences only allow for an isomorphic interpretation (i.e., for all children, it is the case that they do not like spinach). However, Van Kampen (2023) observed that children primarily produced utterances with an inverse scope interpretation (i.e., it is not the case that all children like spinach). While these results are not concerned with double negation, they nonetheless provide support for a non-adultlike interpretation of negation in early childhood, which may be extended to the acquisition of double negation in Dutch.

Taken together, the findings of the studies described above demonstrate that young children acquiring a DN-language go through a stage of NC-interpretations of doubly negated sentences, possibly due to NC being the default parameter setting in the languages. This notion has also been supported by evidence from artificial language learning in adults.

1.3 Developmental language disorder and negation

The previous section has outlined the acquisition pattern of sentences containing two negative items in DN-languages. However, all research so far has been limited to children with a TLD; how their peers with DLD compare to this pattern, remains underexplored.

DLD is a term used to describe language impairments without a clear cause, affecting approximately 7% of all children (Bishop, 2010). Originally, DLD was only diagnosed in the absence of neurological or cognitive problems, behavioural disorders and hearing deficits (Stark & Tallal, 1981). However, more recently, researchers have acknowledged that DLD often co-occurs with other conditions (Bishop et al., 2017). While children with DLD form a heterogenous group displaying deficits in all language domains (Bishop, 2017), morphosyntax often is particularly problematic (Leonard, 2014).

Children with DLD have been found to show delayed patterns of acquisition on various linguistic structures, including, for instance, the production of tense morphemes (Rice & Wexler, 1996) and relative clauses (Frizelle & Fletcher, 2014). Importantly, Thornton et al. (2016) have demonstrated that children with DLD also go through a prolonged period of non-adultlike production of negation. In their study, 5- to 6-year-old children with DLD participated in an elicitation task that aimed at the production of sentences containing doesn't. The children mainly produced negative utterances of a non-adultlike form, resembling utterances of 2- to 3-year-olds with TLD. Further evidence for the problematic nature of negation for children with DLD is found in a study by Dai et al. (2022), who investigated the production of negated sentences in Mandarin Chinese by

preschoolers with DLD. Their results showed that children with DLD produced negative utterances that are ungrammatical in adult Mandarin Chinese, indicating that negation is problematic. Based on these studies, negation therefore appears to pose difficulties for children with DLD and may develop in a delayed fashion compared to children with TLD.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

Considering the limited research on children's interpretation of doubly negated sentences, and the, to my knowledge, lack of research on this topic for children with DLD, the present study will further explore this topic. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. Are 5-year-old and 8-year-old monolingual Dutch children with TLD adultlike in their interpretations of sentences containing two negative constituents?
2. Are 5-year-old and 8-year-old monolingual Dutch children with DLD adultlike in their interpretations of sentences containing two negative constituents?

With regards to the first research question, it is predicted that 5-year-old children with TLD will interpret the sentences as non-adultlike NC due to the fact that this might be the underlying parameter setting (Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2022; Thornton et al., 2016). For instance, a Dutch sentence such as *de jongen heeft niet niks geschreven* ('The boy didn't write nothing') would be interpreted as a situation in which the boy wrote nothing. In contrast, 8-year-old children with TLD are expected to have reached adultlike DN-interpretations, corresponding to an interpretation of the example above in which the boy wrote something. With regard to the second research question, both 5-year-old and 8-year-old children are hypothesized to interpret the sentences as containing NC, as a result of the hypothesized default NC parameter setting in combination with the delayed language acquisition patterns often associated with DLD, specifically in relation to negation (Thornton et al., 2016).
The study will focus on Dutch, since this language does not allow for NC-interpretations of sentences with double negation. This offers benefits over English, as certain varieties of English do allow for NC-interpretations, which may create a confound. The choice for Dutch therefore provides a clear distinction between the grammatical adult DN-interpretation, and the hypothesized ungrammatical NC-interpretations of children.

3. METHODOLOGY

The method used in the present study will largely resemble the design employed by Thornton et al. (2016), with some alterations to the test items to account for the characteristics of the DLD sample. Section 4.1 will first provide a description of the participants that will be tested in the present study. Subsequently, sections 4.2 and 4.3 will describe the experimental design as used in Thornton et al. (2016), as well as the changes to the design that the present study will contain.

3.1 Participants

The present study will test four groups of children: 5-year-olds with TLD, 5-year-olds with DLD, 8-year-olds with TLD, and 8-year-olds with DLD. Additionally, a group of adult controls will be tested. The age of 5 years old was chosen because this aligns with the minimum age used in previous studies demonstrating non-adultlike interpretations of doubly negated sentences in young children (Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2022; Thornton et al., 2016). The age of 8 years old for the older group of children is chosen on the assumption that they are expected to perform more adultlike than their peers with DLD, despite the fact that no research appears to have attempted to identify the age at which children are able to access the adult DN-interpretation. The children with DLD will be diagnosed as such by a clinical professional, whereas the children with TLD will have no linguistic deficits. All participants will be monolingual speakers of Dutch to eliminate

possible influences from other languages. The study will control for children's general linguistic abilities by administering standardized language tests. To control for morphosyntactic skills, the Recalling Sentences subtest of the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF-5-NL; Wiig et al., 2019) will be used, which requires children to repeat sentences after the experimenter. Vocabulary skills will be controlled for using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III-NL; Schlichting, 2005).

3.2 Procedure

The study will make use of a TVJT, which will be conducted in largely the same fashion as in Thornton et al.'s (2016) experiment. In their study, an experimenter acted out a story with toys while a second experimenter with a puppet watched the story together with the participant. After the story, the experimenter asked the puppet three questions, which were answered by the puppet in the form of a statement. The three statements corresponded to a test item, a control item, and a filler item. The questions and corresponding statements were asked one after another after each story. The participant was then asked whether the puppet's statement was true or false in the context of the story. For children, their verbal answers were recorded. Adult participants were asked to write down their answers. All stories and statements were presented live to the participant to keep the experiment engaging. Children were tested individually, while adults were tested in small groups. The experiment began with two practice items containing a statement that was clearly true and a statement that was clearly false to introduce the participants to the task and ensure that they understood what was being asked of them.

The present study will follow Thornton et al.'s (2016) procedure as described above, but, rather than presenting the puppet's statements live, the decision was made to use recorded versions of the statements. Thornton et al. (2016) reported that live delivery of the statements was used to keep the participants engaged and that neutral intonation for all statements was used. However, it can be questioned whether it is possible to maintain perfectly neutral intonation for all statements and for each participant. Any change in intonation could bias a certain interpretation. Therefore, to minimize the influence of intonation on participants' interpretations, the present study will prerecord the statements with neutral intonation and play the recordings to the participants, though it should be noted that intonational effects cannot be fully excluded. Since the stories, which take up the bulk of the experiment, will still be presented live, it is assumed that the task will remain sufficiently engaging for the children.

3.3 Materials

Thornton et al. (2016) used six different stories, each followed by three questions and corresponding statements. An example story (6), test item (7), control item (8), and filler item (9) taken from Thornton et al. (2016) are demonstrated below.

(6) Two girls are playing at home. One is practicing skipping tricks. She invites the other girl to join her, but the second girl doesn't want to skip. Instead, she wants to go out to buy some flowers for their mum's birthday. The second girl leaves, but on her way to the flower shop she meets a friend at a café and stops to have a drink. Meanwhile, a young boy comes by the flower shop and buys a bouquet. There is now only one bouquet left at the shop. Just then, the skipping girl decides she's practiced enough tricks, and she wants to rush to the shops before closing time. She goes straight to the flower shop and buys the last bouquet. The girl at the café (the girl who didn't skip) suddenly remembers she has to get to the flower shop, but when she arrives there are no flowers left, so she ends up buying nothing.
(Thornton et al., 2016)

(7) Experimenter: In that story, did the girl who skipped buy nothing?
Puppet: The girl who skipped didn't buy nothing.
(Thornton et al., 2016)

(8) Experimenter: Did the mouse who didn't dress up cook nothing?
Puppet: The mouse who didn't dress up cooked nothing.
(Thornton et al., 2016)

(9) Experimenter: Did the boy buy something?
Puppet: The boy bought nothing.
(Thornton et al., 2016)

For half of the test items in Thornton et al.'s (2016) study, the statements were true on a DN-interpretation and false on a NC-interpretation. For the other half, the statements were false on a DN-interpretation and true on a NC-interpretation. Thornton et al. (2016) included the control items to check whether children are able to process sentences containing double negation, since these statements do not give rise to either DN- or NC-interpretations.

The present study will make use of the same kinds of stories, questions, and statements as in Thornton et al. (2016). However, some changes will be made to avoid floor performance in the youngest DLD group. The stories will be decreased in length and will be simplified to ensure that all children are able to understand them. This decision was made since the stories in Thornton et al. (2016) experiment are relatively long and might be rather complex for young children with DLD, as these children have been found to experience difficulties with oral narrative comprehension (Dawes et al., 2019). Furthermore, the test items in Thornton et al. (2016) included sentences with relative clauses. However, it has been shown that children with DLD find it difficult to interpret relative clauses, resembling the behaviour of younger children with TLD in their performance (Frizelle & Fletcher, 2014). Therefore, the test sentences will not contain any relative clauses. Below are examples of a story (10), test item (11), control item (12), and filler item (13) based on the materials of Thornton et al. (2016) that will be included in the present study.

A bunny wants to bake a carrot cake, but she is all out of carrots. She goes to the store to get some carrots, but the store is closed. She returns home, and, because she does not have any carrots to bake a cake with, she decides to have a different snack instead. When looking around the kitchen, she realizes that she does have apples. The bunny then bakes an apple pie.

(10) Experimenter: *Heeft het konijntje niks gebakken?*
Has the bunny nothing baked
'Did the bunny bake nothing?'
Puppet: *Het konijntje heeft niet niks gebakken*
The bunny has not nothing baked
'The bunny didn't bake nothing'

(11) Experimenter: *Heeft het konijntje iets gebakken?*
Has the bunny something baked
'Did the bunny bake something?'
Puppet: *Het konijntje heeft niet iets gebakken*
The bunny has not something baked
'The bunny didn't bake something'

(12) Experimenter: *Heeft het konijntje iets gebakken?*
Has the bunny something baked
'Did the bunny bake something?'

Puppet: *Het konijntje heeft niks gebakken*
The bunny has nothing baked
'The bunny baked nothing'

Because the sentences will not contain any relative clauses, control items such as those used by Thornton et al. (2016) with two negative items in different clauses, cannot be used. Therefore, the control items in the present study contain a negative marker like not followed by a positive marker like something. While this means that the control sentences will not reflect children's ability to process two negative markers, it still requires the processing of two markers and will thus assess processing capacities in that respect.
All stories will follow a similar storyline, ensuring that the stories are comparable and assessing the same linguistic structure (Crain & Thornton, 1998). Furthermore, as was also assured in Thornton et al.'s (2016) test materials, all stories will adhere to the condition of plausible dissent (Crain & Thornton, 1998, as cited in Thornton et al., 2016). This means that the context of the story provides an alternative (false) scenario in which the incorrect interpretation would have been true (Thornton et al., 2016). In the example in (10), it could have been true that the bunny baked nothing if she had not encountered the apples in her kitchen.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The proposed study sets out to investigate whether adultlike DN-interpretations are accessible to 5- and 8-year-old children, and whether children with DLD experience a delay in the shift from NC- to DN-interpretations. In the TVJT, adults are predicted to accept statements in line with a DN-interpretation and reject statements indicating NC-interpretations. All 5-year-olds are expected to demonstrate the reverse pattern, accepting NC-interpretations and rejecting DN-interpretations. For the 8-year-old children, a contrast between children with TLD and DLD is expected: The hypothesis is that 8-year-olds with TLD will perform adultlike and accept DN-interpretations and reject NC-interpretations, whereas 8-year-olds with DLD are predicted to accept NC-interpretations and reject DN-interpretations, demonstrating a delayed acquisition of DN.
If these predictions are borne out, the results may be evidence for a default NC-parameter in DN-languages, as well as for a delayed switch in this parameter for children with DLD. It may, however, be the case that the problematic nature of negation for children with DLD is so severe that the 8-year-olds still experience considerable difficulties in comprehending double negation, and still perform non-adultlike. This would indicate that the delayed acquisition of DN-interpretations extends even further into childhood. Conversely, children with TLD might master adultlike DN-interpretations earlier than expected, and may already reach adultlike levels of DN-interpretations at age 5. This would contrast with findings on English (Thornton et al., 2016) and German (Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2022), and may indicate that the default NC-parameter is switched more quickly in Dutch than in other DN-languages, potentially due to the structural differences in the ways in which negation is realized across languages.
It is important to note that there are several limitations to the proposed design of the study. In the first place, the suggested control items are not directly comparable to those used by Thornton et al. (2016) due to the removal of the relative clauses, which may not render them as effective for measuring processing abilities. Still, the simplification of the statements is likely to be necessary to avoid floor performance in the youngest DLD group. Secondly, the ages chosen in the proposed design are based on limited evidence from different languages due to the scarcity of research on the acquisition of DN-interpretations. While this may limit the extent to which these ages can be considered to be optimal for the populations and language under investigation in the proposed study, they nevertheless provide a theoretically motivated starting point.
All in all, the proposed experiment will be able to shed light on young children's comprehension of doubly negated sentences. This will provide valuable insights into the hypothesized presence of a default

NC-parameter in DN-languages, as well as how this develops in children. No research has yet explored this in Dutch nor in children with DLD, so the proposal for the present study aims to close this gap.

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