Petra Schulz at the Bochum Language Colloquium, January 14, 2021

More information about the talk:

»Acquisition of Exhaustive wh-Questions: A Cross-Linguistic Perspective«

In this talk I discuss how the exhaustivity property of single wh-questions like *Who is sitting?* and of multiple wh-questions like *Who is sitting where*? and *Who is giving what to whom?* develops in children. The basic question is whether–despite the well-known syntactic and lexical-morphological variation in wh-question formation across languages (e.g., Bošković, 2003; Dayal, 2005, 2017; Grohmann, 2003; Hagstrom, 2003)– the interpretation of exhaustive wh-questions follows a universal acquisition pattern.

Drawing on experimental comprehension data across 19 languages, coming out of two EU projects (COST Action A33, COST Action IS0804), I will show that acquisition of exhaustive wh-questions is cross-linguistically robust. First, across languages comprehension of single wh-questions was easier than that of paired and of triple wh-questions, with basically no difference between the latter two. Second, cross-linguistic uniformity was also found regarding the most frequent non-target answers: so-called 'singleton' responses to single and multiple wh-questions, and exhaustive lists of subjects or objects to multiple wh-questions. Syntactic and lexical-morphological variation in wh-question across languages minimally affected performance patterns in some languages and did so without altering the acquisition path: mastery of single wh-questions occurs around age 5 and systematically precedes mastery of multiple wh-questions.

Based on these findings I propose the following universal acquisition path for exhaustivity in wh-questions: preceded by an initial stage in which children's representation of wh-questions contains one proto-variable resulting in singleton answers, children acquire 'exhaustivity', i.e., universal quantification over one variable, resulting in exhaustive lists of subjects or objects. In the third acquisition stage they acquire 'mapping', resulting in exhaustive pair-lists/triples.

Our study has implications for semantic theories of wh-questions and for semantics in acquisition: first, our data suggests that the mention-all reading in single and in multiple wh-questions is derived by the same 'exhaustivity' feature, providing novel support for semantic ambiguity accounts of single wh-questions and against pragmatic accounts (see e.g., the discussion in Xiang 2016, 2020). Second, the little variation we found in the acquisition of exhaustive wh-questions strengthens the general assumption that well-formedness conditions on semantic representations are universal (see Tsimpli 2014, Schulz & Grimm 2019).