Acquisition of Recursion in Child Mandarin

Daoxin Li¹, Xiaolu Yang², Tom Roeper³, Michael Wilson³, Rong Yin³, Jaieun Kim³, Emma Merritt³, Diego Lopez³, Austin Tero³
¹UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, ²TAINAN UNIVERSITY, ³UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST
Contact: Daoxin Li daoxinli@sas.upenn.edu

Introduction

• Recursion
  - Core of the language faculty (Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch, 2002).
  - Cross-linguistic differences in form (Snyder & Roeper, 2004).
• Acquisition of recursion in English, Dutch & Japanese
  - Children successfully interpret recursion involving possessives, PPs, and RCs around age 6 (e.g., Limbach & Adone, 2010; Pérez-Leroux et al., 2012; Sevcenco et al., 2015).
  - 3- to 4-year-old children tend to interpret recursion as conjunction and to drop embedded DPs (e.g., Limbach & Adone, 2010; Roeper, 2011).
• Recursive possessives in Mandarin and English
  - Multi-level recursion, left branching; explicit marker – de and ‘s
• Acquisition studies in Mandarin
  - Four-year-olds can understand and produce two-level recursive possessives in a Truth Value Judgment task (Giblin, Shi, Zhou, Bill, & Crain, 2018).
• Corpus data: Why 2-level may not be enough
  - But three-level is critical to show recursion: e.g. Bloomingdale’s men’s clothing = men’s clothing available at Bloomingdale’s or clothing belonging to Bloomingale’s man (a) non-recursive: DP – NP (b) recursive: DP (DP)
• And 2-year-olds produce both kinds of structures:

Methods

• Participants
  - Thirty Mandarin-speaking children from two age groups (4-year-olds: N = 10, M = 4.0, range = 3.4 – 4.5; 6-year-olds: N = 20, M = 5.11, range = 5.4 – 6.4).
• Familiarization phase
  - Children were shown pictures depicting possessive relations on iPad (Figure 1).
• Experimenter described the relations with recursive possessives; children repeated.

![Figure 1. Sample picture for familiarization phase](image)

Experimenter’s description of Figure 1: “Look! There is a robot. The robot has a snake. So this is the robot’s snake. The snake has a lion. So this is the robot’s snake’s lion. The lion has a cookie. So this is the robot’s snake’s lion’s cookie.”

• Test Phase: Act-out task
  - Children were shown with pictures of possessive relations similar to those in familiarization phase on iPad (Figure 2), and were instructed to give an object to one character according to the recursive possessive they heard.
• Test items in total: 2 one-level, 5 two-level, 5 three-level.

![Figure 2. Sample picture for test phase](image)

Test items for Figure 2:

a. one-level possessive: she-de shizi snake GEN lion
b. two-level possessive: jiujin-de shizi-de she robot GEN lion GEN snake robot’s lion’s snake
c. three-level possessive: jiujin-de she-de shizi-de binggan robot GEN snake GEN lion GEN cookie robot’s snake’s lion’s cookie

![Figure 3. Percentage of correct answers of 4- and 6-year-olds per level](image)

Results

Table 1. Percentage of types of answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>Possessive level</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Error: Conjunctive</th>
<th>Error: Reductive</th>
<th>Other errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-yr</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All</td>
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<td>11.67%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9.17%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-yr</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>72%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>10.42%</td>
<td>9.17%</td>
<td>5.42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Interpretation of recursive possessives
  - Coding: Test item – robot’s lion’s snake
    - Conjunction: robot, lion, snake;
    - Reduction: robot’s snake

![Figure 4. Percentage of conjunctive answers of 4- and 6-year-olds per level](image)

Discussion & Conclusion

• The higher the recursion level, the greater difficulty children had with interpretation.
• Children avoided recursion by interpreting it as conjunction or by dropping one or more embedded DPs. Younger children gave more reductive answers and fewer conjunctive answers than older children.
• Evidence shows a sharp shift between 2- and 3-level, which we believe to be a shift from non-recursive to recursive structures. Given that 2yr-olds already show very suggestive evidence of spontaneous NP-generic possessives and recursive DP possessives, 3-level possessives are important in that they provide sharp evidence of recursion.
• The fact that English-speaking children need to learn both NP and DP recursion, and that possessives can be either left- or right-branching could delay their acquisition compared with Mandarin-speaking children.

Selected References