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Scalar implicatures in English L2

This study investigates scalar implicature comprehension in English L2. Recent research (Feeney et al. 2004, Guasti et al. 2005, among others) suggests that the rate of scalar implicature drawing in adult L1 is not at ceiling level as one would expect in native speakers. The interpretation of scalar items such as ‘some’ is not always a pragmatic one, that is to say there is a percentage of native speakers that interpret them in their logical sense (‘possibly all’ in the case of ‘some’). Slabakova (2010) tested a group of Korean learners of English both in their L1 and L2 to assess their scalar implicature comprehension and found that these subjects were more pragmatically accurate in their second language than in their first language. Even more surprisingly, this group of Korean learners were more accurate in English than a group of English native speakers in the pragmatic interpretation of the scalar term ‘some’. This is a highly unexpected result considering that linguistic competence, at whatever level, is always higher in L1 than in L2. Formisano (in press) analyzed the interpretation of the scalar ‘some’ in Italian learners of English (m.a. 27) both in their L1 and their L2, and found that the scalar term was always given its pragmatic interpretation. Through the analysis of the motivations provided by the participants to justify their answers, this study highlighted that even answers that could have been interpreted as a logical meaning attribution to ‘some’ (e.g. agreeing with the sentence ‘Some elephants have trunks’) were actually instantiation of scalar implicatures due to the conjuring up of alternative realities. The present research will adopt the same methodology and test younger individuals to check for the emergence of a developmental factor in implicature understanding (see Chierchia *et al.* 2004, Noveck 2001, Papafragou and Musolino 2003, among others) and, also, to verify whether a more pragmatically oriented testing methodology will foster scalar implicature drawing in children and adolescents.

Two groups of Italian learners of English will participate in the study: children with an age range of 9-11 and adolescents with an age range of 12-14. The control group will be constituted by two other groups of Italian native speakers (matched for age and sex) tested in their L1. Participants will be tested on their comprehension of the term ‘some’ in English (and in Italian for the control group) through the administration of a test. The test is a Power Point™ presentation with a total of 40 slides testing comprehension of the scalar term ‘some’. The 40 slides are divided as follows: 8 sentences with a pragmatically infelicitous ‘some’, 8 sentences with a felicitous ‘some’, 8 sentences with a true ‘all’, 8 sentences with a false ‘all’, 4 absurd sentences with ‘some’, and 4 absurd sentences with ‘all’. The sentences are written on the slides and, in half of the cases, are accompanied by a picture to provide a context for sentence interpretation (not for the absurd sentences). Subjects will be asked to say whether they agree or not with what the sentence states, and to motivate their answer. In the case of sentences with no picture, they will be asked to make reference to world knowledge in typical contexts or to refer to the common sense of the words. Results of the two groups will be compared and analyzed to verify the pragmatic (over logical) meaning attribution to ‘some’ and, also, to check for the emergence of a developmental factor in the pragmatic processing of the sentences. The expectation is that providing subjects with a context for word interpretation or instructing them to make reference to typical world knowledge will foster the pragmatic interpretation of the scalar ‘some’ in children/adolescents as well as it did in adults.

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