

THE ACQUISITION OF WH-QUESTIONS IN HAKKA

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Abstract

This paper deals with the acquisition of monoclausal *wh*-questions in Hakka. Several experiments done in Cantonese, English, Korean, and Japanese have been reported; however, there is no unanimous result. I had done a study in Mandarin Chinese but found that there is no subject/object asymmetry. In this paper, I conducted a study of the acquisition of *wh*-questions in Hakka to test for the pure syntactic effects of a possible subject/object asymmetry in the relative difficulty of *wh*-questions. My study focus on simple *wh*-questions which are subject *wh*-question (e.g., Who is kicking John?) and object *wh*-questions (e.g., Who is John kicking?). The crucial issue is whether subject *wh*-questions are easier to acquire than object *wh*-questions in

Hakka and how important is the role of age in the acquisition of *wh*-questions.

Method

Subjects

A total of 50 children participated in the present study. But only 24 children's data are adopted here. For statistical concern, some of the data were excluded. The number of children under age 5;00 were few, and would not be able to run statistics. Therefore, only children above 5;00 are included. The children are divided into two age groups: age 5;00-5;06, and age 5;06-5;12. Each group includes 12 members.

Materials

The materials used for the present study consisted of 16 pictures: 4 for the

training session and 12 for the main tests. Two of the four pictures for the training session are used for eliciting *which one*-questions, one for subject *wh*-questions and one for object *wh*-questions. One of the remaining two pictures is used for subject *who*-questions, and the other for object *what*-questions.

Procedure

The experiment is conducted in Hsinchu county. Children are tested individually in an area separated from the classroom in four kindergartens.

The task in the present study is based on Hanna & Wilhelm (1992). Children are shown a picture depicting an action that involves two participants, one of whom is hidden from sight (*who* and *what* questions) or a picture depicting an action involves three participants, in which case part of the picture is hidden from the sight (*which*-questions). In order to create a reasonable situation for the children to ask *wh*-questions, a dog puppet is used. When a child is presented a picture, the

experimenter provided a cue such as “The cat is pulling someone. The doggie knows who the cat is pulling. Could you ask him?” Then, the child has to ask the doggie a *wh*-question.

In the training session, when a child does not understand the task, the experimenter asked the child “Can you say ‘Who is drawing a picture?’ for example and had the child model the sentence. In the main test session, no correction of incorrect responses is given; positive reinforcement is used (e.g., nodding, “good” or “that’s right!”) for all responses. All sessions were tape-recorded.

Analyses

The children’s responses are categorized as either correct or incorrect. The frequencies and percentages of correct responses for each language group and each age group are first analyzed descriptively to provide an overview before the inferential statistics are discussed.

Results

Overall, the scores for subject *wh*-questions were consistently higher than the scores for object *wh*-questions. A similar tendency is seen in the scores of correct responses by age group. The most frequent error pattern is grammatical reversals of *wh*-words, which occurred more often in object *wh*-questions than in subject *wh*-questions.

The syntactic hypothesis predicts that there should be an asymmetry between subject and object *wh*-questions. The result of t-test with respect to the syntactic hypothesis indicates that there is no significant difference between the subject *wh*-questions and object *wh*-questions ($df = 22$, $t = 2.6 < 2.819$, $P = .01 < n.s.>$). Therefore, subject and object *wh*-questions are equally difficult for Hakka-speaking children.

Self-Evaluation

The most difficult part of this experiment lies in the subjects. There

are few children who could speak Hakka nowadays. It is difficult to judge if those children who could not speak Hakka well really understands Hakka or not. Therefore, we have excluded quite a lot of subjects who did not pass our first screening. That's the reason we ended up with 50 subjects. Children living in Taipei county and Taoyuan county could hardly speak Hakka. Hence, we only conduct this experiment in Hsinchu county, which enhanced the difficulty of this experiment since I live in Taipei county now. Next time, I should extend the area to Miaoli county since I discovered later there are more children who could speak Hakka. Compared with the result of our previous experiment, this experiment is quite a disappointing one since not too much could be said about the data due to the limited amount of subjects included. However, we still could see the tendency for the non-existence for the asymmetry of *wh*-subject and *wh*-object questions in both Mandarin Chinese and Hakka. Next summer, I will redo part

of the experiment so that we could have a more clear picture of the whole issue.

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