Acquisition of Exhaustivity: Evidence from Mandarin

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Abstract
We present two experiments testing Mandarin-speaking 6 y.o.s’ understanding of at-issue/not-at-issue exhaustive constructions: ZY “only”, Shi…(de) cleft, Pseudo-cleft, and Plain Focus sentence.

Discussion
Children are sensitive to not-at-issue exhaustivity by age 6: • Rejecting non-exhaustive interpretation of pseudo-cleft and plain focus sentences (Exp. 1 & 2); • Children use “yes, but…” with not-at-issue exhaustivity constructions: SD clefts, pseudo-clefts and plain focus sentences (Exp. 1 & 2); • Children are sensitive to the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue exhaustivity: • Children are more sensitive to the exhaustivity of only than that of other constructions (shown by their high rejection to non-exhaustive interpretation with only). Exp. 10; • “ZY only” sentences do NOT elicit “yes, but…” answers (Exp. 10).

Exhaustivity: Developmental Trajectory
Exp. 1 & 2 extend the developmental trajectory of exhaustivity-triggering constructions depicted in Zhou and Crain (2010, Notley et al. 2009):
• At-issue exhaustivity (ZY “only”) ZHIYOU John ate an apple.
  John ate an apple. No exhaustivity (2.5 y.o.)
  John only ate an apple. VP scope exhaustivity (25.5 y.o.)
  • Not-at-issue exhaustivity (SD Clefts)
  SHI John ate an apple.
  John only ate an apple. No exhaustivity (6.0 y.o.)
  John ate an apple. VP scope exhaustivity (25.5 y.o.)

Questions of Current Study
• Do native speakers interpret ZY “only” and SD cleft in the same way w.r.t. exhaustivity?
  Exp. 1 (No!)
• Do children have trouble interpreting (not)-at-issue exhaustivity?
  Exp. 2 (No!)

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Selected References