

Just who didn't eat what, exactly? Negation and universal quantification in the real world.

Ben Ambridge, University of Liverpool

The findings summarized by O'Grady demonstrate that when learners are confronted with a sentence type that they rarely hear, a left-to-right incremental processing strategy plays an important role in guiding its interpretation, even if this requires overruling possible transfer from an L1 (e.g., for English learners of Korean). Where this processing strategy yields two possible interpretations (as for English), L2 learners initially favor the interpretation consistent with their L1 (e.g., Korean) - and L1 learners neither – before both coming to favour the dominant interpretation for that language.

All this seems perfectly reasonable. What seems to me to be less reasonable is using what learners do when they hear extremely infrequent and artificial sentence types to draw conclusions about language acquisition in general (including whether or not it exists).

As O'Grady acknowledges (p.11), speakers almost never say things like *Mike didn't eat all the cookies*. Why not? Because such utterances are so ambiguous as to be almost useless: In principle, *any* element could be interpreted as being negated (*Mike didn't eat all the cookies [Bill did]*; *Mike didn't eat all the **cookies** [but he did eat all the sandwiches]* etc.). So, what might a real speaker actually say when defending Mike against allegations of excessive cookie consumption?:

(1) He didn't have *any* (see O'Grady, footnote 8; Musolino & Lidz, 2006: 834).

(2) He (only) had a *couple*.

(3) He doesn't even *like* cookies.

(4) Don't look at *him*!

Each of these constructions expresses a particular meaning with regard to whether Mike ate some/all/none of the cookies, even though (2) includes no negation, (3) no quantifiers and (4) neither. Thus linguistic development here cannot consist of the processor becoming more proficient at interpreting particular sequences of negation markers and quantifiers. When it comes to acquiring the pairing between a particular construction (e.g., *Don't look at X*) and a particular meaning ('X did not do the thing that you appear to suspect him of doing), there is no substitute for learning (i.e., for "language acquisition"). Indeed, as O'Grady acknowledges (footnote 8), the very reason that *Mike didn't eat all the cookies* has the preferred interpretation that it does is that speakers have learned more common constructions that better express the alternative hypothetically-possible meanings.

To sum up, that learners use a left-to-right processing strategy when interpreting an infrequent and unfamiliar construction is an interesting, but ultimately peripheral, phenomenon. The core process of language acquisition is learning which constructions real speakers most commonly use to express particular intended meanings.

Musolino, Julien & Jeffrey Lidz. 2006. Why children aren't universally successful

with quantification. *Linguistics* 44, 817-852.