

Exhaustivity in wh-questions – the ones that got away

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Exhaustivity is an important feature of the semantics/pragmatics of wh-questions. Schulz (2015) suggests that it is a good indicator for comparing language development across languages, as the semantics of questions should be universal. This can be exploited for evaluating bilingual development. Previous studies with TD children found that exhaustivity is being acquired between the ages of 4–6 for German children (Penner, 1994) and between 5–6 years of age for English children (Roeper & de Villiers 1991).

This study investigates the performance of 10 bilingual TD German-Russian children in three age groups ranging from 4;6 to 9;11 with a mean age of 5;11 (SD 1;6) in the German exhaustivity task by Schulz et al. (2011). We aim to verify earlier results (Roeper et al. 2007, Schulz et al. 2011, Schulz 2010) with regard to a) age of successful acquisition of exhaustivity in bilinguals and b) parallel development of paired and triple wh-questions. For bilingual children we expect a noticeable delay. Additionally, we will pay special attention to individual error analyses and compare these to findings from previous studies.

Overall, the results confirm the findings by Roeper et al. (2007). By the age of 6;0 German-Russian bilingual TD children have completely acquired exhaustivity, not showing a substantial delay. Comparing our findings to results from bilingual children with other first languages (Arabic, Portuguese, Turkish) shows that the exhaustivity task is effective only from the age of six and older.

One child mastered single and triple wh-questions as well as wh-questions with a quantifier “alle/s”, but failed to answer any of the paired wh-questions correctly and instead provided subject lists only. Lein et al. (2015) document three similar cases (see also Schulz 2010). In addition I will show that individual cases with unexpected results could serve as evidence that exhaustivity should be used with caution as a diagnostic tool for language impairment cross-linguistically, since semantic properties of question formation in L1 and L2 might influence the acquisition path.

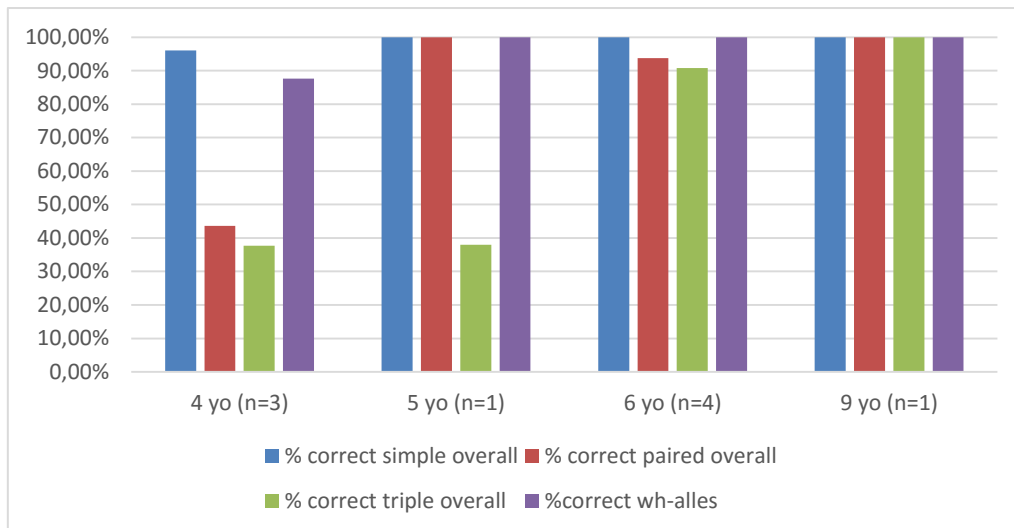


Figure 1: Group results in different test conditions, outsider excluded)

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