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- (3) Name of author: Jennie Tran
- (4) Affiliation of author: Department of Linguistics
Ph.D. Program
University of Hawaii
United States
- (5) Email address of author: jennietr@hawaii.edu

The syntactic development of classifier phrases in young Vietnamese children

This study investigates for the first time the syntactic development of numeral classifiers in Vietnamese, employing both longitudinal and cross-sectional data. Naturalistic longitudinal data were collected over a period of 6-11 months from four children at the ages 1;9, 1;11, 2;4 and 2;6, living in Vietnam, to determine the emergence of their first classifiers and to trace the early syntactic development of classifier phrases. To investigate later syntactic as well as semantic development, cross-sectional data were collected from 50 children between the ages 2;10-5;6, at a daycare center in Vietnam. Over several sessions, children participated in two experimental elicited production tasks (114 stimuli: pictures, toys and real objects requiring different types of classifiers) as well as semi-controlled naturalistic dyadic interactions.

There have been some previous studies in other Asian languages that have investigated the syntactic development of classifier phrases: Erbaugh 1982, Hu 1993 on Mandarin, Carpenter 1987 on Thai, and Wong 1998 on Cantonese. Consistent with results of studies in other Asian languages, the four longitudinal children in my study demonstrate early knowledge of the classifier slot in a noun phrase. As early as age 1;11, they can produce an obligatory classifier, not only with a noun, but also with a demonstrative and an interrogative. Between the ages 2;0-2;7, they build two- and three-element classifier phrases, using not only the general classifier as a placeholder, but also their 'favorite' classifier. Contrary to Wong's (1998) results that Cantonese children tend to combine a classifier with a number before they combine it with a head noun, my results show that Vietnamese children do the reverse. Up to age 3;2, they perform poorly in numeral constructions, omitting classifiers, making word order errors, and indicating numerals incorrectly. In numeral constructions, Vietnamese children overuse the general classifier much less frequently than do children learning other languages; they either omit the classifier or employ overgeneralizations and overextensions with the five different classifiers they know at that age. The results from the cross-sectional data show that such errors decrease only after age 3;2. The results also show that as of age 4, children's increasing ability to count facilitates their production of classifier phrases. The findings in my study strongly support the claim that children's ability to count and their understanding of enumeration and quantification affects their ability to use classifiers syntactically. There is a strong interaction between cognitive knowledge and syntactic development.

395 words

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