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An investigation into the Development of Simultaneity in Child Temporal System

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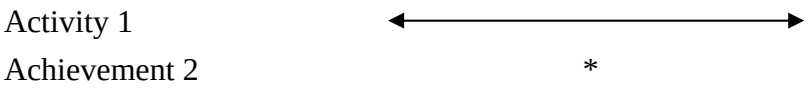
Abstract

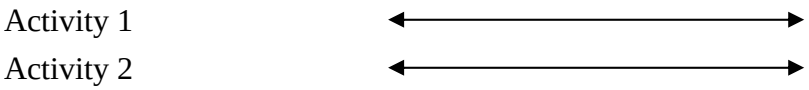
Our research has investigated the linguistic development of Hong Kong Cantonese speaking children in respect of their abilities to describe simultaneous temporal relations. Notwithstanding that such topic has been the focus of many previous studies (eg. Aarssen, 2001; Aksu-Kuc & von Stutterheim, 1994), most of the researchers tended not to divide temporal simultaneity into sub-categories in terms of the temporal overlapping of the two actions or events concerned.

In our study, four types of simultaneous relation have been identified (see below) and we have studied how children utilize the linguistic devices to depict these scenarios:-

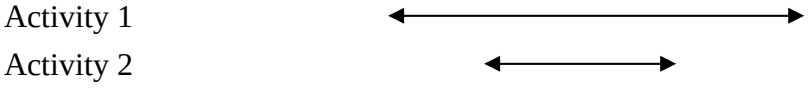
1. Punctual Embedded Simultaneity



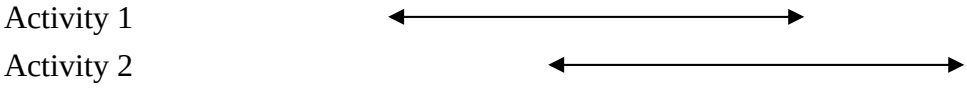
2. Perfect Simultaneity



3. Procedural Embedded Simultaneity



4. Partial Simultaneity



Subjects were divided into four age groups (i.e. 4-year-olds, 5 to 6-year-olds, 7-year-olds and the adults as control), each of which consisted of 10 subjects. Speech productions were elicited from the subjects by a series of animations.

The findings of our study suggest that overt expressions for simultaneity emerge at quite a late stage of language development, probably at the age of 6 or 7. We find that the 4-year-olds only give descriptive sequences[1] to all types of simultaneous relations as illustrative by example (1) in which the 4-year-old child was describing a punctual embedded simultaneous scenario. The 5-year-olds try to differentiate different simultaneous relations by means of the imperfective aspects. Such devices help the children cope with perfect and embedded simultaneity [see examples (2) and (3)], but not partial simultaneity. In fact, children as old as 7 in our study still find the partial simultaneity difficult to encode. We suggest that the conceptual complexity of the temporal relations do influence the performance of the children.

[1] Descriptive sequences, according to Trabasso and Stein (1997), are stories entirely comprised of descriptions of states and objects with no temporal orders.