

### Adult L2-learners lack *the* maximality presupposition, too

L2-English learners frequently overuse ‘*the*’ in place of ‘*a*’. This error has been traced to semantic factors like *scope* and *referentiality* (Thomas 1989, Ionin 2003). However, previous studies haven’t drawn a strong connection between L2- and L1-acquisition. We argue for **similarity between L1- and L2-acquisition of articles**, and demonstrate that ***partitivity as discourse-given knowledge (1) contributes to ‘the’ overuse*** in L2-English, as in child L1-English.

- (1) A DP is [+partitive] iff it denotes an individual that is a member of a set introduced by previous discourse (cf. Enç 1991).

It is well-known that children overuse ‘*the*’ in *partitive* contexts (Maratsos 1976; Karmiloff-Smith 1979): in (2), *the boy* is [+partitive], denoting a member of the set *four boys*. Wexler (2003) argues that ‘*the*’ overuse in (2) is a semantic (not pragmatic) problem: children’s entry for ‘*the*’ in (3) lacks the *Maximality* (uniqueness) presupposition. Under this proposal, *the boy* can mean *one of the boys*: ‘*the*’ without Maximality has the same presupposition as *partitive* indefinites.

- (2) A: Four boys played a game. Who won the game?  
 B: (children’s answer) *the boy*.

- (3) Child’s *the*: at index *i*, [*the x*]P is:  
 - true, if there is an *x* at *i*, and it is P  
 - false, if there is an *x* at *i*, and no *x* is P  
 - truth-valueless, if there is no *x* at *i*

We hypothesize that **L2-learners also have difficulty with Maximality**. This predicts that L2-English learners will overuse ‘*the*’ in [+partitive] contexts, independently of other semantic factors (*scope, referentiality*).

Our predictions were tested with 20 L1-Korean adult L2-English learners via *forced-choice elicitation*. (Korean lacks articles). Learners supplied articles in [+partitive] and corresponding [-partitive] indefinite contexts. Scope (wide or narrow) and referentiality were varied across contexts (*referentiality* indicates *speaker knowledge* – Fodor and Sag 1982, Ionin 2003). Definite contexts were also tested.

We found that **partitivity contributed significantly to ‘*the*’ overuse with indefinites** regardless of whether set membership was explicit (*four boys – a boy*) or implicit (*orchestra – a musician*). Repeated-measures ANOVAs showed no significant interactions between partitivity and scope/referentiality:

- A) Partitivity contributed to ‘*the*’ overuse ( $p < .001$ ) independently of scope [Table1].  
 B) Partitivity contributed to ‘*the*’ overuse ( $p < .01$ ) independently of referentiality [Table2] (But there was a main effect of referentiality).

Table1: %‘*the*’ overuse

	[+partitive]	[-partitive]
wide-scope indefinites	29%	6%
narrow-scope indefinites	26%	3%

Table2: %‘*the*’ overuse

	[+partitive]	[-partitive]
referential indefinites	39%	30%
non-referential indefinites	16%	4%

(A cloze test on knowledge of determiners, administered to an additional 20 L2-learners, also yielded significant partitivity effects).

Our findings show that **L2-learners’ errors are systematic**, reflecting access to the semantic concept *partitivity*. The parallelism between child L1- and adult L2-acquisition argues that ‘*the*’ overuse is tied to a semantic factor (lack of Maximality, Wexler 2003) rather than to children’s egocentricity (Maratsos 1976). Furthermore, our data provide evidence that ***partitivity and referentiality are independent factors at work in L2-acquisition***. We suggest that both factors are also at work in L1-acquisition, drawing on findings of Maratsos 1976 (partitivity) and Brown 1973 (referentiality). **[500 words]**

Heejeong Ko (MIT), Tania Ionin (USC), Ken Wexler (MIT)  
GANALA 2004, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

**References.**

- Brown, R. 1973. *A first language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Enç, M. 1991. The semantics of specificity. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 22, 1-25.
- Fodor, J. & I. Sag. 1982. Referential and quantificational indefinites. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 5, 355-398.
- Ionin, T. 2003. Article semantics in second language acquisition. PhD thesis, MIT
- Karmiloff-Smith, A. 1979. *A functional approach to child language*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Maratsos, M. P. 1976. *The use of definite and indefinite reference in young children*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Thomas, M. 1989. The acquisition of English articles by first- and second language learners. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 10, 335-355.
- Wexler, K. 2003. Maximal trouble. Paper presented at CUNY Sentence Processing Conference, MIT.