Child-like Adults

The purpose of a large number of studies in language acquisition is to investigate the extent to which children’s linguistic knowledge reflects properties of Universal Grammar. The discovery of unexpected differences between adult and child language seem to suggest that child grammar differs from the target adult grammar. However, in view of learnability problems, the Continuity Hypothesis (Pinker, 1984; Crain, 1991) proposes that child language can differ from the adult language only in ways in which adult languages can differ from each other.

In light of these considerations, the present paper investigates one aspect of semantic competence where children are sometimes found to behave differently than adults: universal quantification. Since the work of Inhelder and Piaget (1964) it has been found that young children sometimes reject a sentence like *Every boy is riding an elephant* as an accurate description of a situation in which every boy is riding an elephant if there is an ‘extra’ elephant (i.e., one not being ridden by any boy). However, children’s non-adult responses fail to emerge in tasks that arguably satisfy the relevant felicity conditions associated with the task (Crain, Thornton, Boster, Conway, Lillo-Martin and Woodams, 1996). This suggests that children non-adult responses in previous research might be due to an experimental artifact, the infelicity of the task, rather than to a difference between children’s and adults’ grammar.

The present study examines adults’ on-line processing of sentences containing the universal quantifier *every* using a head-mounted eye-tracking system. In particular, we investigate how the satisfaction of (or failure to satisfy) felicity conditions influence adults’ interpretation of spoken sentences associated with visually presented scene. To address this issue, we examined the on-line patterns of fixation duration by adults in response to the ‘extra’ objects (the objects nobody is using) both in context that evoked non-adult responses from children, and in contexts that evoked adult-like responses from children. The findings show that adults experience the same difficulties children do in responding to sentences with the universally quantifier in infelicitous tasks. By extension, the findings support the view that the satisfaction of felicity conditions, rather than
differences in the grammar of children versus adults, provides a better explanation of the behavior shown by children in previous research.