

## **Early use of articles does not mean early mastery: The case of Afrikaans-Speaking and South African English-Speaking Monolingual Four- to Nine-Year-Olds**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the elicited production of articles by monolingual Afrikaans-speaking and South African English-speaking children. Two types of article distinctions were studied: part/whole and general/specific. Part/whole articles, e.g., in I will eat an apple, but not the core (Ek sal 'n appel eet, maar nie die stronk nie), the core of the apple is a part of the apple, therefore the *is* is used as a part/whole marker. General/specific, e.g., in I saw a man and a dog. The man was very friendly but the dog growled at me (Ek sien 'n man en 'n hond. Die man was baie vriendelik, maar die hond het vir my gegrom) refers to the contrast between the *and a*, indicating which man and which dog has been established in the discourse, i.e., the interpretation of the man and the dog requires shared knowledge between speaker and hearer of previously introduced concepts. Previous studies comparing the development of these distinctions yielded conflicting results in terms of the age at which they are mastered. These include one small-scale study among Afrikaans and English-speaking children (see Southwood & Van Dulm, 2012). In order to add to the existing literature on these article distinctions, a large-scale study was conducted on the two languages. The research questions were: (a) Does development in the article system take place after age four in terms of part/whole and general/specific distinctions? and (b) Specifically, is there a difference in children's production of part/whole and general/specific articles? The article production task of the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Evaluation was performed with 1012 Afrikaans- and 413 South African English-speaking four- to nine-year-olds. Results indicate that even the nine-year-olds had not mastered all article production items; although they could indeed produce *a* and *the* (or *'n* and *die* in Afrikaans), they had not yet fully acquired all the nuances of the article system. Furthermore, items involving a part/whole distinction were more difficult across age groups and languages than those involving a general/specific distinction; yet these two types of article distinctions remained positively correlated, with knowledge of the one increasing as knowledge of the other did. Our results support the general finding of other scholars that early use of articles by children does not mean early mastery of the article system (Garton 1983; Karmiloff-Smith 1979; Warden 1976). Considering that monolinguals are still in the process of acquiring articles at the age of nine, our expectations of what children should know at school-going age should be managed. This also has implications for what we should expect from children who are second language speakers of these languages. Cross-linguistic studies of more languages, from other language families, could indicate if the finding that Afrikaans and South African English patterned in the same way was due to the (similar) structure of these two languages or due to other factors (such as the children's theory of mind).

**Keywords:** articles; part/whole distinction; general/specific distinction; child language; Afrikaans