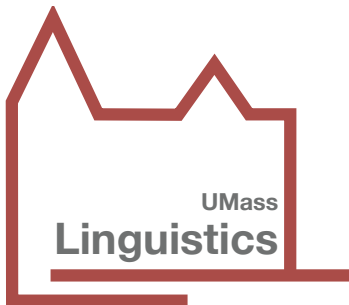


One Too?

The Meaning of Plural Morphology in English

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joint work with Uli Sauerland and Kazuko Yatsushiro



roadmap

- * What linguists do
- * The ‘strong theory’ of the plural
- * Problems for the strong theory
- * The ‘weak theory’ of the plural
- * Implicatures / weak meanings go strong
- * Evidence for implicatures in plural meanings

what linguists do

- * Observing (linguistic) behavior of language users
- * Model the language faculty



today's menu

- * meaning of plural / singular distinction in English count nouns

things to be ignored

[s] (as in *cats*)

[z] (as in *dogs*)

[ez] (as in *houses*)

[] (as in *fish*)

things to be ignored

[s]

(as in *cats*)

[z]

(as in *dogs*)

[ez]

(as in *houses*)

[]

(as in *fish*)

Plural

things to be ignored

Singular

[s]

(as in *cat*)

[z]

(*dog*)

[ez]

(*house*)

[]

(or *fish*)

Plural

things to look at

- * meaning of the singular and plural morpheme

more particular

- * *dog.singular* and *dog.plural* have a common element: dog (without singular or plural)

think of its meaning as your favorite
“dog”-meaning

- * this combines with singular or plural
- * what do singular and plural contribute to the meaning

scenarios & sentences

- * judging sentences in scenarios

dog!

* dog



dog!

* dog



dog!

* dog



dog!

* dog



dogs!

* dogs



dogs!

* dogs



dogs!

* dogs



dogs?

* dogs?



the 'strong theory'

- * [Singular] one
- * [Plural] more than one /
two or more

Why a 'weak theory'?

- * If we have a straightforward hypothesis about the meaning of the plural morpheme that corresponds to our intuitions, then why change it?

no monkeys

* There are no
two or more monkeys
in this
picture.



no monkeys

There are no monkeys in this picture

≠

There are no **two or more** monkeys in this picture

soccer

- * Every boy should
bring his
two or more sisters.




Every boy should bring his sisters.

≠

Every boy should bring his two or more
sisters

polite plurals

* Could you maybe move over a bit?

* Könnten Sie  wohl
Could they maybe
etwas rücken?
a bit move over



polite plurals

- * Thou speak'st in better phrase
and matter than thou
didst.
- * Methinks you're
better spoken



polite plurals

- * **Thou** speak'st in better phrase
and matter than **thou**
didst.
- * Methinks **you're**
better spoken



polite plurals

Could you.pl please move over a bit?

≠

Could you two/all please move over a bit?

the 'weak theory'

- * [Singular]: one
- * [Plural]: any number

the 'weak theory'

- | | |
|---------------|-------------|
| | strong |
| * [Singular]: | one |
| * [Plural]: | any number |
| | two or more |

but...

* dogs?



a puzzle



weak meanings go strong

H. P. Grice



implicatures [preliminaries]

- * (scalar implicatures)
- * *X entails Y*: whenever *X* is the case, then *Y* is necessarily the case as well

implicatures [preliminaries]

* Earlier I met some of my students.

* Earlier I met all of my students.

more informative

implicatures

Why didn't she say that she met all of her students? If it was true, it would have been more informative, and she surely would have know if it was true... I guess it isn't true then.



implications

“Earlier, I met
some of my students”



She met some, but not all, of
her students earlier.



implicatures

* Earlier I met some of my students.

* Earlier I met all of my students.

more informative

implications

more informative

* If you have fulfilled some of the requirements,
you may come back.

* If you have fulfilled all of the requirements,
you may come back.

implications

- * If you have fulfilled some of the requirements, you may come back.
- * Certainly, if you have fulfilled all of the requirements, you may come back as well.
- * no implicature
- * ~~If you have fulfilled some, though not all, of your requirements, you may come back.~~

for plurals

- * under the weak theory of the plural, the singular is more informative
- * “Grice corollary”
you should use the singular,
unless it is blocked

blocking the singular...

- * when the intended referent is plural



blocking the singular...

- * if some boys have more than one sister.



blocking the singular...

- * if the singular form is blocked for politeness reasons



So...

- * nothing blocked the singular
- * strengthening happens
- * that is, using the plural triggers a *not singular* implicature



kids and implicatures

- * computing implicatures is something that kids master late
- * if plurals depend on implicatures, they will be hard if not impossible for kids

help the puppet

- * “Does a dog have tails?”
- * 14 mono-lingual children 3;4 - 5;9
- * 13 questions, among them 5 target items



help the puppet

	adults	kids
* “Does a dog have tails?”	no	yes

- * In test items, kids showed non-adult behavior 96% of the time, while in controls only 3% of the time

($p < .00001$)

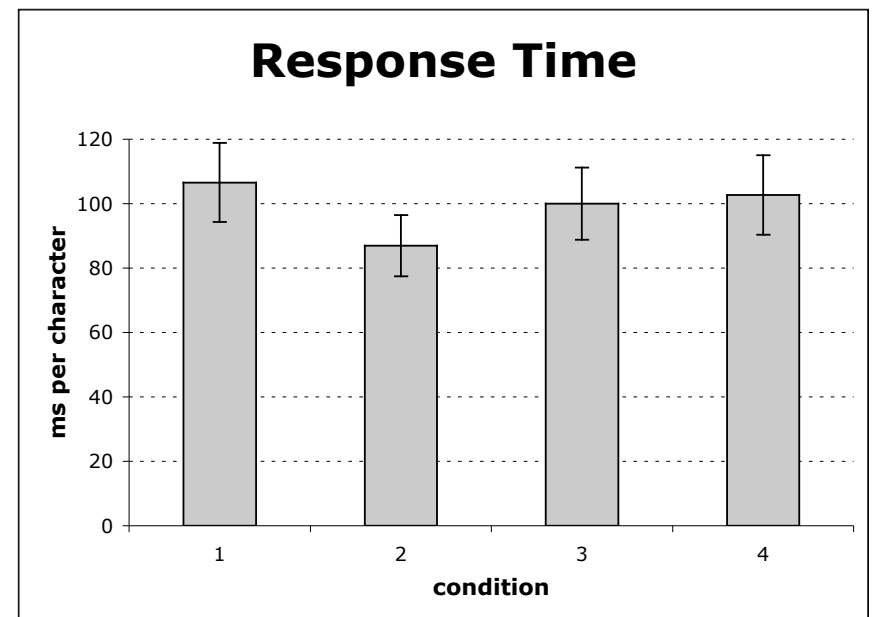
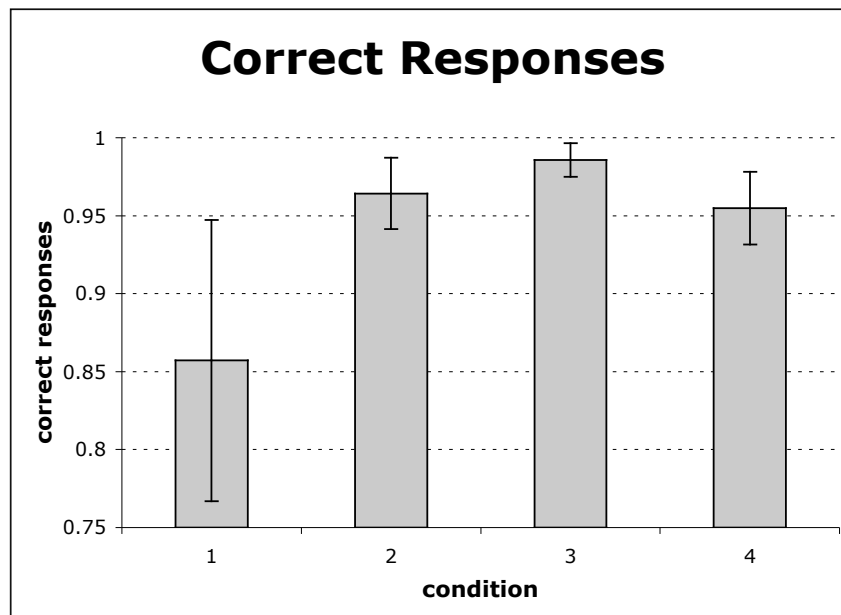


adults and implicatures

- * if something is impossible for kids, it might be hard for adults...
- * similar questions, timed yes/no response

adults and implicatures

- 1 Does a dog have tails?
- 2 Does a dog have two tails?
- 3 Does a goat have horns?
- 4 Does a goat have two horns?



you made it!



Thank you!