



The acquisition of sluicing in Dutch pre-schoolers

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Ellipsis

> Ellipsis = meaning without form

> Sluicing example

- Anna kan iets zien, maar ik weet niet wat [...].

Anna can see something, but I don't know what.

> Non-elliptical counterpart

- Anna kan iets zien, maar ik weet niet wat Anna kan zien.

Anna can see something, but I don't know what Anna can see.



Analysis of sluicing

- › How much structure is present in the ellipsis site?
 - **No structure** (e.g. Culicover & Jackendoff 2005)
 - Anna sees someone, but I don't know who.
 - **Full structure + deletion** (e.g. Merchant 2001)
 - Anna sees someone, but I don't know who ~~Anna sees~~.



Acquisition of ellipsis

- > Most research on verb phrase ellipsis (VPE) and noun phrase ellipsis (NPE)
- > Important findings
 - English 3-7 year-olds correctly interpret VPE in coordinated structures. (Foley et al. 2003; Matsuo 2007; Thornton & Wexler 1999)
 - *Oscar bites his apple and Bert does too*
 - English and Dutch 3-6 year-olds correctly reject wrong interpretations of NPE. (Wijnen, Roeper & Van der Meulen 2004)
 - *There are some kids playing in the sandbox. Are two upside down?*
 - NPE is acquired before VPE, indicating an intricate acquisition path for ellipsis. (Goksun et al. 2011)



Acquisition of ellipsis

- > Only 1 study about the acquisition of sluicing
- > By Wood (2009)
 - English children (4;5-7;8)
 - Grammaticality judgment task
 - *Someone is feeding the dog, but I don't know who.*
 - *The boy is hiding, and I know where.*
- > Conclusion: Acquisition of sluicing somewhere between 5;5 and 6;8



Acquisition of sluicing

> Why?

- How do children learn to interpret something that is not said?
- To extend research on the acquisition of VPE and NPE.
- Acquisition of ellipsis ties in with research of the acquisition of anaphora.



Research questions

- > How do children interpret anaphora?
 - At what age do Dutch children comprehend sluicing sentences?
 - At what age do Dutch children produce sluicing sentences?



Experiments

- > Comprehension of sluicing
 - Picture selection task
 - Pretest with simple embedding

- > Production of sluicing
 - Card game – elicitation



Subjects

- > 30 children from pre-school in Groningen
 - 13 girls
 - 17 boys
 - Mean age 5;4
 - Age range 4;8-6;1

- > Adult control group (n=5)



Comprehension experiment

- > Picture selection task
 - 4 pictures per item
- > Children were asked to help the puppet choose the best picture
- > 2 practice items
- > 6 pretest items
- > 24 test items
 - 16 sluicing sentences and 8 control sentences



Comprehension experiment

> Test conditions

- Sluicing sentences

1. With negation (SluiceNeg)

- Iemand trekt een auto, maar ik zie niet wie.
- *Someone is pulling a car, but I can't see who.*

2. Without negation (SluicePos)

- Iemand trekt een auto en ik zie wie.
- *Someone is pulling a car and I can see who.*

> Verbs (8)

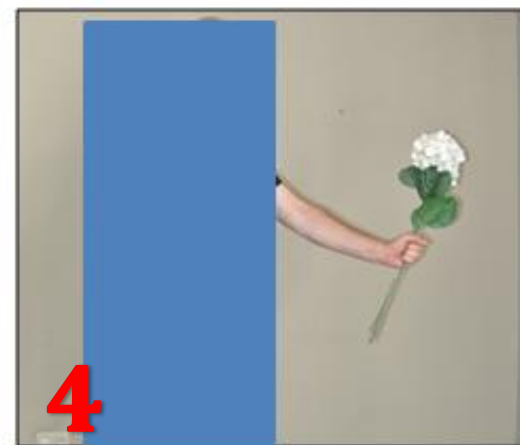
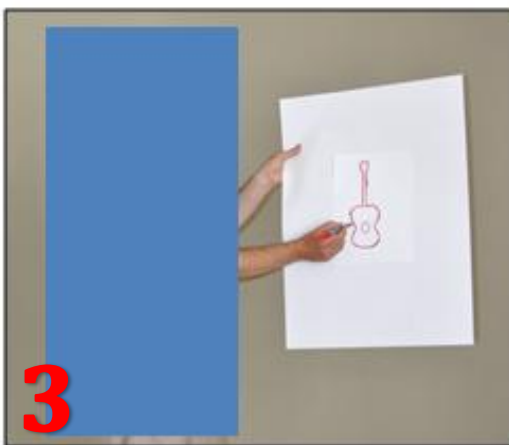
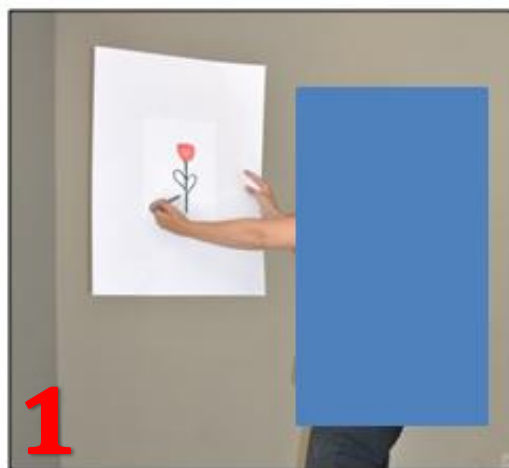
- Trekken (*pull*), duwen (*push*), tekenen (*draw*), snijden (*cut*), vasthouden (*hold*), lezen (*read*), openmaken (*open*), wassen (*wash*)



Comprehension experiment

Iemand tekent een bloem,
 maar ik zie niet wie.

*Someone is drawing a
 flower, but I can't see who.*





Comprehension experiment

> Control conditions

- Non-elliptical sentences

1. Sluicing counterpart with negation (CounterNeg)

- Iemand trekt een auto, maar ik zie niet wie een auto trekt.
- *Someone is pulling a car, but I can't see who is pulling a car.*

2. Sluicing counterpart without negation (CounterPos)

- Iemand trekt een auto en ik zie wie een auto trekt.
- *Someone is pulling a car and I can see who is pulling a car.*

3. Regular coordination with different object (CoordObj)

- Iemand trekt een boot, maar ik zie niet wie een auto trekt.
- *Someone is pulling a boat, but I can't see who is pulling a car.*

4. Regular coordination with different action (CoordAct)

- Iemand duwt een auto, maar ik zie niet wie een auto trekt.
- *Someone is pushing a car, but I can't see who is pulling a car.*



Production experiment

- > Card game – elicitation
 - 1 practice item
 - 8 test items

- > Procedure
 - The child gets 3 cards.
 - The researcher can't see the cards.
 - The child needs to tell who is doing what by answering questions.



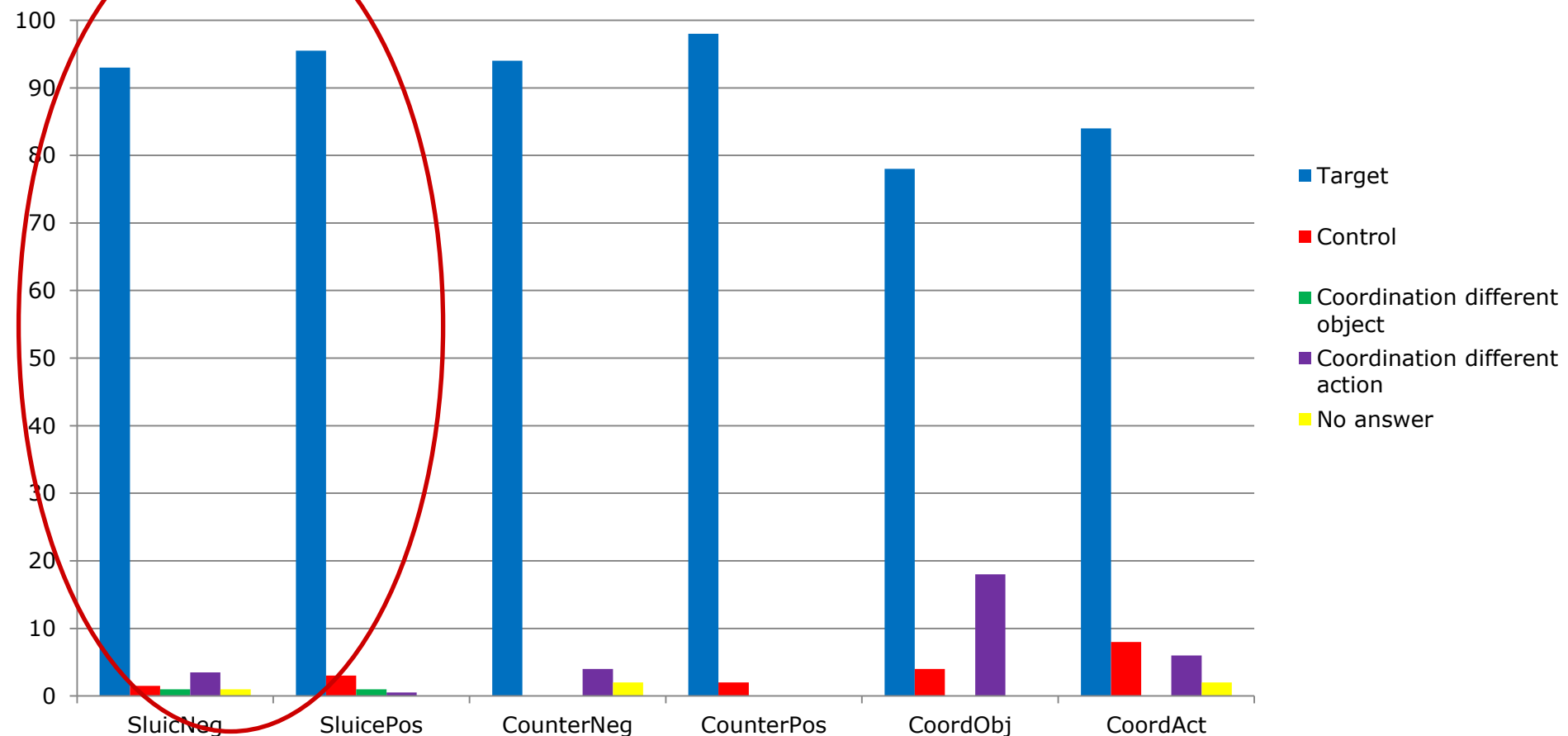
Production experiment





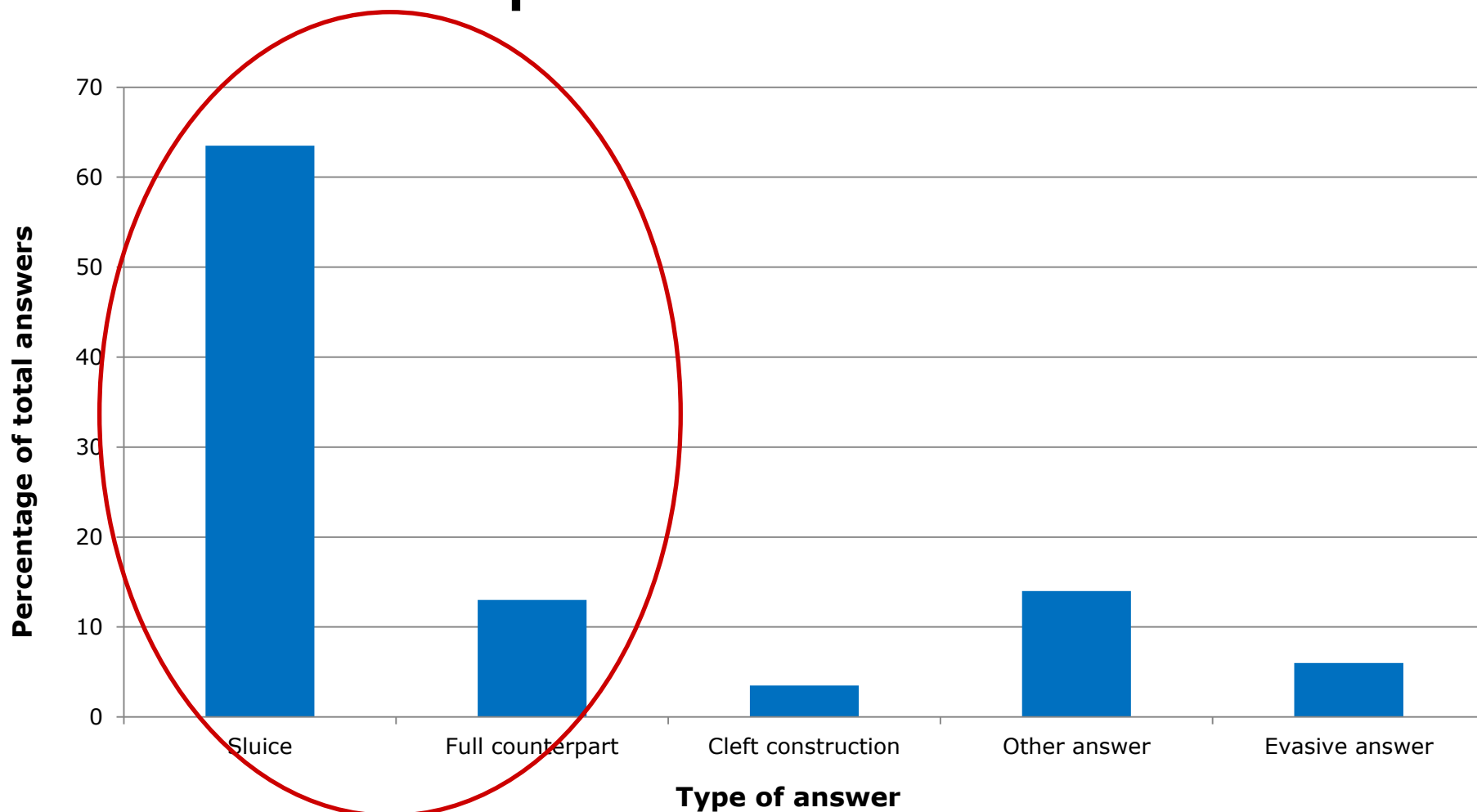
Results comprehension task

Percentage of answers per condition





Results production task





Conclusion

- > Dutch 5 year-olds interpret sluicing sentences correctly and prefer to produce them over their full counterparts.
- > Young children can correctly reconstruct the antecedent of ellipsis, by using linguistic discourse.
 - Our results are in line with NPE and VPE acquisition research. (Thornton & Wexler 1999; Foley et al. 2003; Wijnen, Roeper & Van der Meulen 2004; Matsuo 2007; Goksun et al. 2011)
 - Our results are not in line with sluicing acquisition research. (Wood 2009)



Discussion

> Our contribution

- We developed an experimental method to test the acquisition of sluicing.
- We have shown that 5 year-olds have acquired sluicing.

> Future research

- What do younger children do?
- What happens with different sluicing sentences?
 - Adverbs (someone is running fast, but I don't know who.)
 - Different wh-words
 - Sluicing of objects



Literature

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