

## On the acquisition of polysemous *wel*: evidence against a frequency based account

The Dutch word *wel* is the twentieth most used word in the corpus of spoken Dutch and it is highly polysemous. In this presentation I address the question of how children acquire such a polysemous word.

*Wel* could be called the positive counterpart of *niet* ‘not’. In (1) speaker B uses *wel* to contradict the negative statement of A.

- (1) A: *Stockholm is niet de hoofdstad van Zweden.*  
‘Stockholm is not the capital of Sweden.’  
B: *Stockholm is wel de hoofdstad van Zweden*  
‘Stockholm is the capital of Sweden.’

But it can have other, at first sight totally different meanings too.

- (2) *Het feestje afgelopen zaterdag was wel leuk*  
‘The party last Saturday was OK’  
(3) *Ik heb vandaag wel honderd boten geteld!*  
‘I have counted no less than a hundred boats today!’

In (2) *wel* is used in combination with the predicate *leuk* ‘nice’. The effect is that it weakens the meaning of this predicate. In (3) *wel* indicates that the speaker thinks that the amount of 100 is a lot.

The meanings of some polysemous words can be ordered hierarchically according to their strength. This was claimed for the polysemous preposition (*a*)*round* by Zwarts (2004). Zwarts notes that the word (*a*)*round* has several different meanings ranging from perfectly circular to slightly curved. The different uses are defined by Zwarts in model-theoretic terms using a vector based model and shown to be entailments, i.e. weaker versions of supersets, of the prototypical circle meaning of *round*. Hogeweg (to appear) argues that the meanings of *wel* can be analyzed in a similar way. Dependent on the nature of the negation in the context they are a reaction to, the different uses of *wel* can be ordered according to their strength.

Blutner (2005, 2007) suggests for the case of *rond*, the Dutch cognate of *round*, that the strongest meaning is less frequent than the weaker meanings. A search in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch on the use of *wel* by adult speakers of standard Dutch shows that, like Blutner suspected for *rond* ‘round’, the strongest meaning is by far the least frequent. In over 650 instances of *wel*, only two could be classified as an explicit denial of a denial.

What does this discrepancy of semantic strength and frequency of use mean for the acquisition of the different meanings of polysemous *wel*? Does the pattern of acquisition depend on the frequency of meanings they get as their input<sup>1</sup> or on semantic features? To answer this question the CHILDES database was searched. The data taken from the CHILDES corpus show that in the speech of Dutch children the strongest meaning of *wel* is far more frequent than in adult speech. In over 600 instances of *wel*, 168 could be classified as an explicit denial of a denial. We can conclude therefore that children acquire the strongest meaning early and use it often, despite the rarity of their occurrence in the input. In this presentation I will address the question what mechanisms in acquisition cause this pattern of acquisition of the different meanings of *wel*.

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<sup>1</sup> Child directed speech seems to contain more (19 out of 322) occurrences of the strongest meaning of *wel* than regular adult speech but by far not the high amount used by children themselves. This is still under investigation.