Preschoolers’ interpretation of the focus particle csak ‘only’ in Hungarian

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Research questions
How do Hungarian preschoolers interpret sentences containing the focus particle csak ‘only’?
1. Do they have access to the exhaustive meaning of these utterances?
2. Do they associate this reading with the same constituent as adult native speakers?

Preschoolers’ problem with the interpretation of the focus particle only
Crain et al. (1994)
(3) Only the cat is holding a flag. (Crain et al. 1994:460)
(4) The cat is only holding a flag. (Crain et al. 1994:460)

55.26% accepted both (3) and (4), arguing that the cat is indeed not doing anything else but holding a flag.

The particle csak ‘only’ in Hungarian
As opposed to English, in Hungarian the particle csak ‘only’ immediately precedes the focus associated with it.

(1) John only introduced Bill to Sue.

(a) John csak Bill-t mutatta be Sue-nak. = only is associated with the direct object
(b) John csak Sue-nak mutatta Bill-t. = only is associated with the indirect object
(c) John csak bemutatta Sue-nak Bill-t. = only is associated with the verb

Two conflicting explanations
- Crain et al. (1994), Zhou & Crain (2010): Children cannot restrict the scope of a focus particle. They are VP-oriented, i.e., they tend to associate the focus operator with the VP regardless of its surface position.
- Paterson et al. (2003, 2005/2006): Children interpret sentences with and without focus particles as having the same meaning. They mentally represent only the presupposition (the statement in the sentence), and ignore the asserted meaning component (the requirement of exhaustivity).

References

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Experiment 1

Participants: 15 preschoolers (mean age: 5.9), 15 adults (mean age: 37.5)
Method: sentence-picture verification task
Participants had to judge a puppet’s utterances on a three-point scale:

(1) True

(2) False

(3) non-exhaustive

Stimuli: 32 test items and 24 filler items were presented in a random order.
(5) Csak a nyuszit emelte fel a zászló.
‘It is only the rabbit who has raised the flag.

Overall response rates of preschoolers
In the critical (iii) non-exhaustive condition, the mean scores of preschoolers (1.48) and adults (1.217) did not differ significantly according to Welch’s Two Sample t-test, t(21.783) = 1.397, p = 0.176.
In the group of preschoolers, the mean scores of the (i) exhaustively true (2.933) and the (iii) non-exhaustive (1.48) conditions differed significantly according to the Paired t-test, t(14)=7.923, p < 0.001.

Experiment 2

Participants: 16 preschoolers (mean age: 5.6)
Method: forced-choice picture-selection task
Stimuli: 8 test trials and 8 filler trials
• 4 pictures
  - 4 pictures: same as in Exp. 1
  - simultaneously presented
• 4 sentence types
  - 2x2 design
  - 2 independent variables
  ~ focus type (subject or object focus)
  ~ word order (SVO/QVS or QSV/SOV)

Condition 1: Subject focus, SVO
(6) Csak a maci húz egy zászlót.
‘It is only the bear that is pulling a sled.’
Condition 2: Subject focus, QSV
(7) Egy zászlót csak a maci húz.
‘It is only the bear that is pulling a sled.’

Condition 3: Object focus, QVS
(8) Csak egy zászlót húz a maci.
‘It is only a sled that the bear is pulling.’
Condition 4: Object focus, SVO
(9) A maci csak egy zászlót húz.
‘It is only a sled that the bear is pulling.’

Discussion
Computing the exhaustivity of csak ‘only’
In non-exhaustive contexts, the majority of preschoolers correctly rejected sentences containing the particle csak ‘only’, i.e., in contrast with the hypothesis of Paterson et al. (2003, 2005/2006), they can compute both meaning components of focus operators.
As the results of Experiment 2 show, it is easier for them to do so if the focused constituent is in a sentence-initial position. (The adult-like responses are the highest in the case of subject focus and SVO word order.)

Determining the associate csak ‘only’
In the true + distractor contexts preschoolers tended to be uncertain about the scope of the particle csak: in Experiment 2, they performed at the level of chance regardless of the type of the sentence.
These findings partially support the claim that what children have difficulties with is assigning scope to the focus particle (Crain et al., 1994; Zhou & Crain, 2010), however, the uncertainty of Hungarian preschoolers does not arise from VP-orientation.