

The productivity of Dutch diminutives

Dutch diminutives are formed by attaching one of five suffixal allomorphs (-je, -tje, -kje, -pje, -etje) to a noun. Here's one example:

verkleinwoord-je 'small diminutive'

How does the Dutch child learner figure out the rules prescribing when to use which suffix? Here we address this problem in light of Yang's (2016) Tolerance Principle (TP).

The TP allows one to determine a threshold for the productivity of rules. If the exceptions to a rule stay below this threshold, the rule is deemed productive. By studying the frequencies of the diminutive allomorphs, we can methodically walk through the rules a child learner might consider.

In turn we can then use the TP to measure the productivity of these rules. In order to make such an analysis, we need frequency data of the five allomorphs. To gather this data, I conducted a corpus study on Dutch diminutives, specifically a child directed speech corpus.

By applying the TP to the resulting data, we will discuss how a system of productive rules can indeed be found for Dutch diminutives.