

Friday

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## Children and choices

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Free choice presents a well-known puzzle in the semantics and pragmatics of modals and connectives in natural language, going back to Kamp (1974), among many others. In its classical form, the problem has to do with the interpretation of sentences with a disjunction embedded under a possibility modal. For instance, a sentence like “Kung Fu Panda can push either the green car or the orange car” strongly suggests that he can push the green car *and* he can push the orange one. In other words, it conveys that Kung Fu Panda can choose between the two cars. This conjunctive interpretation is surprising because it does not follow from the standard meaning of modals and disjunction, and is absent in the corresponding sentence without the modal (i.e. “Kung Fu Panda pushed the green car or the orange car” doesn’t at all suggest that he pushed both). There are different approaches to the problem of free choice, which, for our purposes, can be divided into two main camps: One based on implicatures and one not. The two approaches are quite successful in covering the basic empirical landscape related to free choice, but make different predictions in different areas. Child language acquisition, in particular, has been used as an important testing ground for theories of free choice. I will go back to a study comparing free choice and implicatures with 4--6-year-old children (Tieu et al. 2016), the results of which challenge the implicature approach to free choice. I will then present a follow up study which replicates the initial result but adds a novel twist, which is equally challenging for both approaches. I will then outline another key divergent prediction of the two approaches having to do with non-classical configurations of free choice involving negated universal modals embedding conjunctions, such as “Kung Fu Panda doesn’t have to push both the blue car and the yellow car”. I will outline how the comparison between children and adults can be used to test this divergent prediction as well. Overall, children’s acquisition of free choice remains a critical perspective for refining our understanding of this fascinating long-standing puzzle.