

## What is early L1 knowledge of morphosyntax like?

Evidence from comprehension and early sensitivity to grammaticality

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The nature of early linguistic knowledge, in particular in the domain of morphosyntax, is the subject of an on-going debate between proponents of item/usage-based learning denying early abstract knowledge (e.g., Tomasello 2003; Ambridge et al. 2015) and proponents of abstract knowledge with a limited role assigned to frequency in the input (Generativists e.g., Yang 2015). I approach this debate with a close look at the L1 acquisition of Subject-Verb agreement in light of the input to the child, comparing its spontaneous production, comprehension, and early sensitivity to grammaticality.

By the age of 3 English- and Spanish-speaking children spontaneously produce agreeing third person singular and plural verbal forms (e.g. *the duck swims/the ducks swim in the pond*), which they reportedly don't comprehend in experimental settings until the age of 5 (Johnson, de Villiers, & Seymour, 2005 for English; Pérez-Leroux, 2005 for Spanish, using the same methodology and similar verbal stimuli). This has been attributed to the formal/abstract nature of number agreement marking on verbs in contrast with the referential marking of number on nouns.

I present two sets of experimental evidence in children ranging from 14 months to ~5 years of age, depending on the language (French, Spanish). The first set of results from preferential looking and pointing tasks reveals that comprehension is not universally late. In particular it is found at 30 months in one French verbal agreement subsystem, based on three experiments using different methodologies/stimuli. Mis-comprehension, where present, is best characterized as relative mis-perception of number agreement markers. I review language-particular properties which make markers of verbal number agreement easier or harder to perceive and argue that the process of phonological fusion of the prefixal agreement marker with the verbal root specific to French (e.g., liaison; *ils arrivent* => [i(l).zariv] at work in the S-V agreement subsystem tested is – counterintuitively – facilitating detection and therefore comprehension.

The second set of experimental evidence is obtained with the headturn preference procedure. It pertains to the very early sensitivity to (un-)grammaticality of French Subject-Verb agreement dependencies in preverbal children, as well as their changing preferences for (un-)grammatical stimuli, over the course of 10 months (from 14 to 24 months of age). I interpret these changes as evidence for young children's maturing agreement representations, from surface/phonological dependencies to abstract morphological features.

I conclude that young children's knowledge of S-V number agreement is abstract and productive by 24 months of age.