

## On Some Asymmetries in the Acquisition of Number Marking in Catalan and Spanish

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Different studies have suggested that children show problems with Agreement (Meisel 1994, Penner & Weissenborn 1996, Plunkett 2002, among others); however this is not so in the case of Romance null subject languages (Guasti 1994, Bel 1998), at least for Person marking. On the other hand, it is well known that in the process of language acquisition children seem to avoid the use of plural and, when they use it, agreement is erroneous; this is true for all languages regardless of the richness of their number morphology; we are facing the so-called *Avoid Plural Phenomenon*, for which Hoekstra & Hyams (1995) provide an explanation in the light of the Underspecification of Number Hypothesis.

The present paper aims at studying the behavior of Number Agreement in early sentence production in Catalan and Spanish and at providing a unified account for the different number agreement patterns attested.

Data come from different sources: we look at sentences from the oral production data of six Catalan and Spanish monolingual children aged 1;7-2;6 (Childes database); sentences that contained an overt plural subject were extracted and subject distribution (be it preverbal or postverbal) was studied.

First of all we concentrate on Person Agreement feature: the analysis of the properties of the low number of errors indicates the existence of a pragmatic/referential deficit rather than a problem in the syntactic domain.

Concerning the Number feature, first we observe a low number of plural occurrences, in the line of the Avoid Plural Phenomenon (about 200 of a total of 3,000 sentences). However, a deeper observation of the distribution of plural subjects show that child grammar is sensitive to linear order. At this point, a question arises: Why is it that child language is sensitive to linear order in this domain? As far as we know, children show sensitiveness to linear order in other domains of the grammar: subject position in child declarative sentences depends on verb classes. In Bel (2003) it was demonstrated that Catalan and Spanish children tend to produce a higher number of postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs than with other verb classes (unergative, transitive or copula); this pattern is also attested in Italian (Lorusso, Caprini, Guasti 2005).

Turning to number marking, in our data we find that, crucially, the subject only triggers Number Agreement on the verb in preverbal position; when a plural subject appears in postverbal position the verb does not show plural marking. Both patterns are attested regardless of the verb class. This finding allows us to formulate two Number Agreement patterns, as follows:

- a. Preverbal plural subject → Number marking on V
- b. Postverbal plural subject → No number marking on V

It could be assumed that Number Agreement in child grammar must take place only in a Spec-head configuration and not in a government configuration. This implies an overt movement of the DP subject. In order to provide an explanation for these facts, we adopt the proposal by Guasti & Rizzi (2002) who, in the light of child English data, propose that the overt morphological realization of a feature seems to depend in part on whether the feature has been checked in the overt syntax. Accordingly, we suggest that the overt movement of the plural DP to a position in which it enters into an agreement relation with V (the specifier-head relation) is not realized, yielding the possibility that Agreement features not be checked in the overt syntax; as a consequence, the verb surfaces with no plural number marking.

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