Number agreement in English and Xhosa

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In this paper we explore the acquisition of number agreement across subjects and verbs in two radically different languages: English and Xhosa, a Southern Bantu language. In English, number agreement is only found on present tense/generic verbs, except for the variants of the copula. The 3rd person morpheme /s/ is the only manifestation in modern English, and is mastered in obligatory contexts around age 3 years. However, recent results show that English-speaking children are only able to use the 3^{rd} /s/ morpheme as a clue to subject number in comprehension at around 5 years of age, a surprising lag between production and comprehension. This was found using cases such as "the catssleep on the bed/the catsleeps on the bed" in which the plural was disguised by the beginning /s/ on the verb. The natural possibility is that the experiment is "artificial" in that it makes essential what is normally redundant: reliance on the verb morpheme as an indirect clue to subject number. However, the result has been confirmed by studies of languages like Italian (Guasti) and Spanish (Perez-Leroux), pro-drop languages where the verb is the only clue to number because the subject is empty. The possibility arises then that number agreement is unidirectional for the young child, in that the subject number is not retrievable from the verb agreement morpheme. In recent terms, perhaps the agreement features move to check and are then deleted, rendering them inaccessible to meaning.

Xhosa, on the other hand, is a rich agreement language. There are fifteen noun classes each with its own noun prefix, which has to agree with a prefix of subject agreement on the verb. Number is conveyed by these agreements. For example, in 1) the subject noun is of class 1a, and that prefix is also found on the verb in a position higher than Tense. In 2), the subject noun is plural (Class 2a), indicated by a different morpheme also found on the verb.

1)	Utata	uyathenga	evenkileni
	1a-father	SA-1a T-buy-IND	shop LOC
2)	Ootata	bayathenga	evenkileni
	2a-fathers	SA-2a T buy IND	shop LOC

A longitudinal study is reported of six children followed from 24 to 39 months, monolingual Xhosa speakers in Guguletu, a suburb of Cape Town. There are 47 different samples for a total of 1485 utterances. Each utterance has been coded for noun class markers, subject, tense and object agreement. The results to be reported show that in general, Subject Agreement and Noun Class markers are more variable than Tense, but there are no errors of commission, only omission. The children do not mistake one noun class for another, nor do they make number errors, nor do they mismatch the subject agreement prefixes. There are two models of how agreement might work in such a language. The derivational model proposes that verb gets its

class/number from the subject, a directional approach. However, a constraints approach (e.g. Pollard & Sag, 1991) allows that both subject and verb might achieve their marking via agreement with the same Referential Index, i.e. more semantic in nature. We asked the question: Can these data shed light on the two approaches? The copying approach predicts that the verb will not be marked for agreement if the explicit subject noun is not itself marked for class. However a small number of such sentences appear, apparently supporting a constraints approach. The constraints approach would predict semantic overgeneralizations if the child is trying to work out the referential basis of noun classes. Xhosa noun classes are marked by considerable semantic arbitrariness, but there are no instances of errors of commission in the young children's language. The proposal will be offered that number agreement in Xhosa is directional but that the child occasionally both Copies-and-Deletes the class marker.

Object agreement is more optional than subject agreement in the language, but the children are beginning to use it even in the early transcripts. Object agreement being relatively rare, we hope that further analyses of these data will shed light on a new aspect of number agreement.