

Comprehension and production of number and tense agreement by French-learning 40-month-old children

Julie Bodard¹, Thierry Nazzy² & Katrin Skoruppa¹

¹Institut des Sciences Logopédiques - Université de Neuchâtel; ²Integrative Neuroscience and Cognition Center, CNRS – Université Paris Cité

Few studies on subject-verb agreement in young children (and mainly based on spontaneous production analysis and parental reports) are available in French, especially comparing number and tense in comprehension and production. However, an asymmetrical pattern, with plural verb forms more easily understood than singular forms and conversely in production, was found in 5-10-year-old children. Concerning tense, children produced consistently 3rd person singular in present tense earlier (27-month-olds) than perfect and near future (34-month-olds). Here we compared 40-month-old monolingual French-learner's ability to understand and produce (n=30) number and tense agreement between subject and verbs (with double markers: e.g. la-SINGULAR fille mord-SINGULAR 'the girl bites'). Six verbs were presented with a noun phrase in four conditions, to allow both number (3rd person present singular versus plural) and tense (perfect versus near future) comparisons. Children first did a picture elicitation task, and then matched sentences to dynamic gifs in a pointing task. Data were not normally distributed, requiring non-parametric tests (one- and paired-sample Wilcoxon signed rank tests). For number (present), both singular and plural were understood above chance ($p=.002$, $p<.001$), but no significant difference was found between them in comprehension ($p=.222$), whereas singular was produced significantly more than plural (52% versus 22%, $p<.001$). For tense, past ($p<.001$) was understood significantly above chance but not future ($p=.109$), with a significant difference between them ($p=.006$), whereas both were still poorly produced with no significant difference (33% and 31%, $p=.830$). Our results show that French-learning 40-month-olds still show more difficulties in future comprehension and future and perfect production, as well as an asymmetry between 3rd persons singular and plural comprehension and production. We will discuss the reasons in connection with crosslinguistic literature, analyze and discuss links between our experimental results and children's performance on standardized language tests, as well as children's errors and effects of prompting.