

The acquisition of number agreement in L1 and L2 French: focus on input and output

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Like the other Romance languages, French encodes a distinction between singular and plural reference. This distinction is expressed redundantly, resulting in grammatical number agreement. However, the agreement patterns of spoken and written French are very different. Certain researchers talk about two typologically distinct, even opposite, systems (Barra-Jover 2009; Schlyter 1995). Whereas number marking and agreement are partial and heterogeneous in spoken language, they are systematic and transparent in written language. In spoken French, the main locus of number information is the determiner whereas this information is neutralized (i.e. silent) in the majority of nouns, adjectives and verbs, as illustrated in (1).

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
(1)	/lə pəti ɡarsɔ̃ paʁl frɑ̃sɛ/	/le pəti ɡarsɔ̃ paʁl frɑ̃sɛ/
(2)	Le petit garçon parle français 'The small boy speaks French'	Les petits garçons parlent français 'The small boys speak French'

As far as the verb is concerned, number agreement in spoken French is only overtly marked in some groups of verbs, e.g. /ilbwa/ 'he drinks' - /ilbwaʁ/ 'they drink', and in some specific phonological contexts, e.g. /ilariv/ 'he arrives' - /ilzaʁiv/ 'they arrive'. By contrast, in written French, determiners, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and verbs are consistently marked for number by means of suffixes, as illustrated in (2).

In this talk, I will mainly discuss the acquisition of subject-verb agreement in number in L1 and L2 French, with special focus on the adult L2 learner. The aim of my presentation is two-fold. Firstly, I will describe the input situation of the L2 learner and explore the frequency relation of singular and plural verb forms and agreement patterns in spoken and written French input respectively. Secondly, I will present results from a series of empirical studies of Swedish L2 learners of French showing that these learners quickly master the regular number agreement system of written French whereas the development of spoken subject-verb agreement in number is a long and laborious process (Ågren 2008; Ågren & van de Weijer 2013; Ågren 2014). These developmental trajectories will be compared to those of L1 children (Fayol 2003; Prévost 2009) and discussed from the point of view of the characteristics of the French input in this particular domain.

References

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