

A cross-linguistic perspective on early L1 knowledge of subject-verb agreement in  
number

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Against the background of late comprehension of SV agreement in number (e.g. Johnson, de Villiers, & Seymour, 2005; Pérez-Leroux, 2005) we present experimental evidence that mis-comprehension is best characterized as relative mis-perception of agreement markers cross-linguistically. First, I present evidence for the role of various factors including morpho-phonological salience and position in the utterance in facilitating or hindering comprehension in French, English, and Spanish. Second, I present evidence for very early sensitivity to the grammaticality vs. ungrammaticality of French SV agreement dependencies in preverbal children, as well as their changing preferences for grammatical/ungrammatical stimuli over the course of 10 months (14 to 24 months of age). We are interpreting these changes as evidence for a change in the nature of young children's maturing representations, from surface phonological dependencies to abstract morphological features of the dependencies. Overall, young children's knowledge of SV agreement is abstract and productive by the time they are verbal.