

On the Acquisition of Subject-Verb Agreement: A Corpus-Driven Analysis

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Abstract:

This study investigates the acquisition of subject-verb agreement in Jordanian Arabic, focusing on the developmental trajectory of agreement patterns among typically developing children. Using an extensive corpus of approximately half a million words, drawn from over 400 interviews with children aged 2 to 12 years, this research provides a naturalistic view of how subject-verb agreement evolves over time. The analysis reveals an initial stage of overgeneralization where children apply singular verb forms universally, even with plural subjects. By around 4.5 years, a shift occurs as children begin consistently marking plural agreement with plural subjects, though errors persist, particularly where animacy influences agreement. By age 6, children's subject-verb agreement patterns largely align with adult language, with plural markers reserved for animate subjects. The study highlights the interaction between syntactic and semantic factors in the acquisition of subject-verb agreement, demonstrating that early stages of language acquisition are primarily driven by syntactic rules, while semantic considerations, such as animacy, gradually influence agreement choices. This research contributes to the understanding of syntactic dependency acquisition and provides insights into how children adapt and internalize syntactic rules, offering implications for broader theories of language acquisition.