

Agreement marking can benefit child learners

Shira Tal

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Kenny Smith

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Jennifer Culbertson

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Abstract

Agreement, a systematic formal mapping between linguistic elements, adds redundant complexity to languages (e.g., in 'she writes' the -s adds no information), and yet is crosslinguistically prevalent. A prominent hypothesis argues that the ubiquity of agreement may be due to a functional advantage it confers for child learners. Here, we test this using an artificial language learning experiment with 56 English-speaking children (mean age 5;11). We investigate whether agreement can facilitate learning of noun classes (e.g., 'masculine'/'feminine'). In one condition, agreement appeared as a redundant cue to noun classes, whereas in the other condition there was no agreement. Following exposure, we tested children on noun classification for both nouns they were trained on and novel nouns. Results reveal that children classified nouns equally well in both conditions. However, novel nouns were classified better in the agreement condition compared to the no-agreement condition, suggesting agreement can facilitate generalization for child learners.