

What can language acquisition tell us about variability and grammar

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It is well established that children are adept learners of the grammars of their languages, but at the same time are also adept at learning the sociolinguistic variability in the use of those grammars. What happens when these two types of learning come to interact with each other? Yang's variational model predicts that variability in the input which causes ambiguity can affect grammar choice, modeled as grammar competition. In this talk I discuss two case studies of acquisition of number morphology which have different effects. In one case, Chilean Spanish, a phonological process of lenition of syllable-final /s/ leads to a delay in the acquisition of the plural, to the degree that at age 5 some children appear to have settled on a grammar in which grammatical number is not represented in the DP, despite there being other kinds of evidence for number in the form of verbal agreement. Other children, however, *do* arrive at the conclusion that their grammar has grammatical number and can use it proficiently in comprehension tasks. Importantly the variability found within Chilean children is bimodal: children either use number or they do not use number in the noun phrase. In the other case, Brazilian Portuguese, evidence for grammatical number is also obscured, but not by a purely phonological process, but by two arguably independent facts: sociolinguistically conditioned variability in the realization of agreement and number neutral bare nominals. The Brazilian children, unlike the Chilean children, show evidence of having acquired grammatical number in the DP, but also exhibit variability in using it as a cue in certain comprehension tasks. Unlike the variability found in the Chilean children, the Brazilian children exhibit intra-child variability.

These results raise a number of issues that will be addressed: from an acquisition point of view, we ask what the hypotheses are that children entertain with respect to number in the noun phrase and how differences in the input lead to very different intake and consequently different results by age 4-5? From a syntactic and semantic point of view we ask whether these results can help us understand the nature of the representations of grammatical number, agreement and concord in the adult grammar.