

The Acquisition of Number in Saudi Arabic
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This research concerns itself with the grammatical phenomenon traditionally called *number* which paradigmatically contrasts nominal forms expressing reference to a single person or object versus reference to more than one person or object. Consider, for example, the English sentences *The puppy chased the ball* versus *The puppies chased the ball*. In the first case, the noun phrase (NP) *the puppy* refers to a single entity. In the second case, the NP *the puppies* refers to more than one entity. The formal contrast is signalled by use of the regular plural marker (PI) /-s/ (here realized in its phonetic variant [z]). The singular is expressed by the absence of a marker (default 0). In addition, number triggers agreement on the verb in certain tenses.

The construct *number* is an important area in the study of child language development for several reasons: (i) languages differ in the ways in which they express number, (ii) children acquire the target knowledge gradually, and (iii) number involves the interaction of grammatical constraints and other cognitive systems. Cross-linguistic comparisons of the emergence of number can shed light on what is universal versus what is specific to a given language, to a given developmental stage along shared developmental paths, or to what is specific to a given child. Studies of first language acquisition of number have shown that the plural-marking is mastered early in English (Berko, 1958; Brown, 1973; De Villiers & De Villiers, 1973, 1986; Barner & Snedeker, 2006; Kouider et al., 2006; Miller, 2007; Zapf and Smith, 2007; Clark and Nikitina, 2009). Much less is known about the first language acquisition of number in Saudi Arabic (SA) (Al-Akeel, 1998).

The present study examined the acquisition of three morphological structures expressing number in SA: Singular (SG), Dual, and Plural (PI), including what is called in the traditional Arabic linguistics literature the “sound plural” (Feminine Sound Plural (FemSPI) and Masculine Sound Plural (MascSPI)) and the so-called Broken Plural (BPI). The sound plurals involve concatenative morphology; BPI involves templatic morphology. Our investigation garnered experimental data elicited from 25 children speaking SA across five age groups between 2;0 and 6;0.

In this research study we ask: (1) What is the rate and order of the acquisition of number in SA? (2) How do SA-speaking children comprehend and produce this number system? (3) What is the impact of age on the acquisition of number by Saudi children? and (4) What is the broader developmental picture of number acquisition beyond the early stages of learning. Picture-pointing tasks and picture-acting-out tasks were used to collect data.

The main results were as follows: the SG category is mastered before the Dual and PI categories. This might be attributed to the fact that the singular is unmarked, while the dual and the plural are both marked. The FemSPI is mastered before MascSPI, BPI, and Dual. The FemSPI is semantically simpler than the MascSPI, which is restricted to human male professions, which leads to less frequent use. Moreover, the FemSPI formation requires only suffix attachment to the stem, unlike the BPI, which requires the stem to change internally. The Dual category is the most difficult category for the children to acquire because Dual forms are infrequent in SA. Thus, two major findings emerged in this study: children master the SA number system late; and the results from both tasks confirm that FemSPI is the default number category for children speaking SA.

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