

Sources of error in German subject-verb agreement

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The computation of subject-verb agreement is error-prone (Bock & Miller, 1991). A series of experiments aimed at testing the impact of linear vs. hierarchical representations (Vigliocco & Nicol, 1998) on agreement errors in German SVO, SOV, OVS, and OSV sentences.

Case-ambiguous objects yielded a huge effect of subject-object order (error rates OS > SO) that was modulated by adverb position, indicating that the effect could not be reduced to a subject first preference. Ambiguous objects were stronger attractors than genitive attributes of subjects (against Hartsuiker, Antón-Méndez, & van Zee, 2001). The effect of word order was significantly reduced in sentences with objects that displayed unambiguous case marking (Hartsuiker, Schriefers, Bock, & Kikstra, 2003). In addition, an effect of verb position (error rates V-final > V2) was found in L1 speakers but not in L2 speakers.

The results rule out an account in terms of linear proximity. A possible explanation refers to the relative prominence of the potential controllers and to the order of acquisition (agreement associated with V2 in L1 but not in L2; Clahsen, 1986; Clahsen & Muysken, 1989; but see Schimke, 2011). An alternative proposal relies on feature checking in C-command relations (cf. Franck, Lassi, Frauenfelder, & Rizzi, 2006) and accounts for the effects of subject-object order, ambiguity, and verb position.