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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 40(0)

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Publication Date

2018

The production and comprehension of variable number agreement

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Abstract

The relationship between sentence production and comprehension is at the forefront of psycholinguistic research (e.g. Meyer et al., 2016). Psycholinguists are increasingly interested in cross-linguistic perspectives (e.g. Norcliffe et al., 2015). We report studies of the production and comprehension of variable number agreement in Yucatec Maya, an indigenous language of Mexico. We examined the effects of numerosity through a picture description task involving sets of one, two and seven humans or animals depicting an intransitive action. In production more numerous sets led to higher rates of plural production. In a timed acceptability decision task, number agreement rather than numerosity significantly facilitated comprehension. An interaction revealed that plural marking on the noun facilitated the comprehension of singleton versus non-singleton sets. In contrast, plural marking on the verb facilitated comprehension of large versus small non-singleton sets. These results suggest divergent effects of numerosity in the nominal and verbal domains.