

Subject-verb agreement in German-speaking children and adolescents with Down syndrome

Introduction

Children with Down syndrome (DS), a genetic developmental disorder that leads to mild to moderate mental retardation, display noticeable problems in the acquisition of morphosyntax (Roberts et al. 2008). So far, research has been mostly confined to English-speaking individuals. However, English morphology is relatively simple compared to other languages like German for example. The acquisition of subject-verb agreement in main clauses is a crucial developmental milestone in German which is typically achieved by the age of three years (Clahsen 1988). The aim of this study was to examine whether German children and adolescents with DS show problems in the acquisition of this milestone compared to typically developing children.

Method

Using a video description task, 30 short sentences in 2nd and 3rd person singular and 3rd person plural contexts were elicited. 34 children and adolescents with DS (mean chronological age (CA): 12;2 years, mean nonverbal mental age (MA): 4;5 years) as well as a control group of 18 typically developing children (mean CA: 3;11 years, mean MA: 4;4 years) took part in the experiment.

Results

All children in the control group had acquired subject-verb agreement. The children and adolescents with DS performed significantly worse than the control group ($t(33.291)=-6.374$; $p < .001$). However, while a subgroup of 12 subjects with DS has correctness scores of over 90 % for subject-verb agreement (see figure 1), the other children produce mainly (root) infinitives.

Conclusion

For at least part of the subjects with DS, problems in subject-verb agreement do exist despite the fact that these phenomena are typically acquired by the age of three. Therefore, the deficit cannot simply be attributed to the general cognitive delay. Errors consisted mainly of root infinitives which corresponds to an early stage in typical acquisition.

References

Clahsen, H. (1988): *Normale und gestörte Kindersprache: Linguistische Untersuchungen zum Erwerb von Syntax und Morphologie*. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins.

Roberts, J. E., Chapman, R. S. & Warren, S. F. (Eds.) (2008): *Speech and Language Development and Intervention in Down Syndrome and Fragile X Syndrome*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.

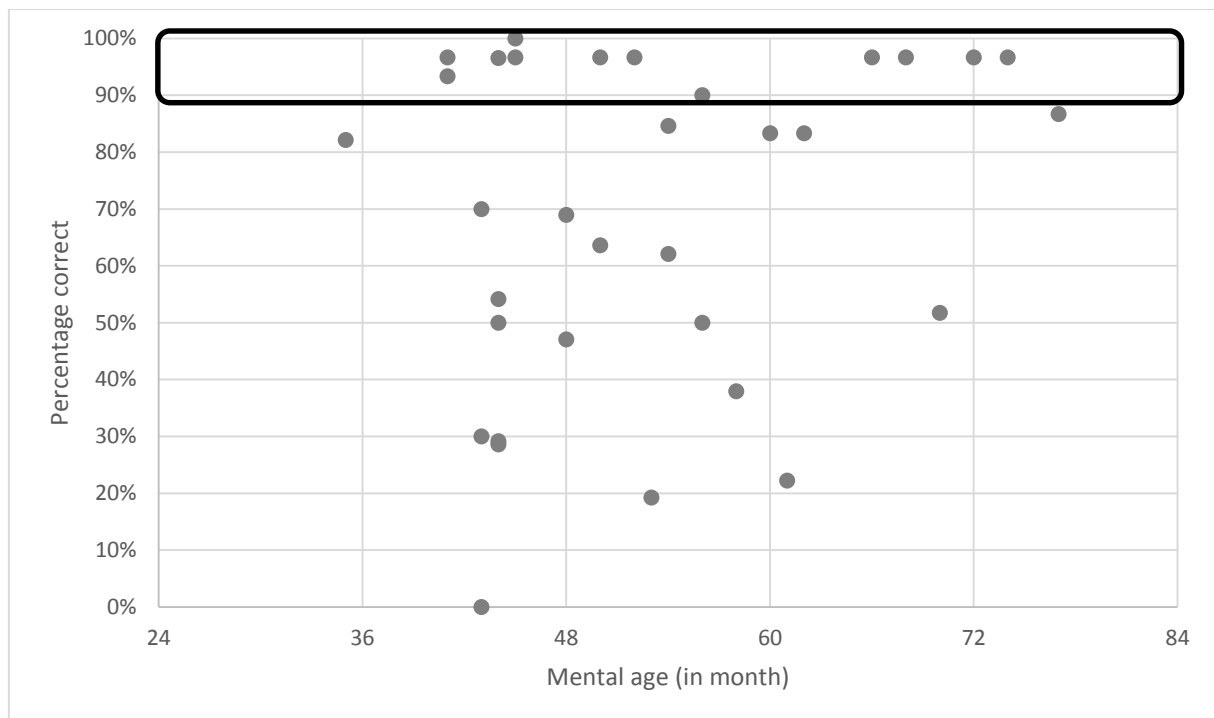


Fig. 1 Percentage of correct subject-verb agreement in relation to nonverbal mental age