

Early productions of Nominal Plural Inflection. A Cognitive Grammar Analysis

A. Mariana Orozco-Arreola, Mary Rosa Espinosa Ochoa
National Autonomous University of Mexico
mariana.orozco.ar@gmail.com

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In Spanish, nominal plural inflection is expressed by adding the morpheme /-s/ or its allomorph /-es/ to the base of the nominal element. According to the *Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* (Real Academia Española, 2010), this inflection entails the presence of “more than one object or entity” of a specified type. However, the plural can take other semantic values. These include lexical plurals that do not indicate multiple instances of a specific type (e.g., *viveres*, “supplies”), plurals with a double object, that is, discrete, symmetrically doubled entities (e.g., *cejas*, “eyebrows”) that function as a set (Farrell, 2000), and pluralia tantum nominals, which either do not exist in the singular or are not frequent in speech (e.g., *trastes*, “dishes”).

Various studies have analyzed the acquisition of the plural in Spanish, but they tend to focus on morphology and syntax (Arias-Trejo et al., 2014; Lleó, 2006; Marrero & Aguirre, 2003; Olvera Yabur, 2018). The semantic characteristics of this inflection have been little studied in child language and have not yet been studied in Spanish-speaking children. This study uses the cognitive grammar approach to the plural (Langacker, 1987; 2008) to describe how children establish the meaning of plural inflection.

From a semantic perspective, grammatical number, and therefore the plural, is expressed mainly in count nouns. According to Langacker (2008), count nouns can refer to physical objects that are heterogeneous and quantified (e.g., *lápiz/lápices*, “pencil/pencils”), a conceptualization that corresponds to the prototypical plural of “more than one.” In contrast, mass nouns refer to homogenous matter and physical substances (e.g., *aire*, “air”; *agua*, “water”; *piel*, “skin”; *arena*, “sand”) that cannot be counted or pluralized. However, there are exceptions, including nouns that are typically count nouns, whose semantic conceptualization is homogenous and similar to a mass noun (e.g., *lentes*, “glasses”).

This study is a corpus-based longitudinal analysis of three middle-class children (2;00,22-3;01,28) from Mexico City, all monolingual in Spanish. Each production ($N = 491$) is considered according to its communicative context in spontaneous interaction. The results show that in early production, Spanish-speaking children use nouns with a plural inflection that do not follow the semantic prototype; they systematically use the homogenous mass forms of lexical plurals (e.g., *juguetes*, “toys”), plurals with double object (e.g., *ojos*, “eyes”; *manos*, “hands”), and pluralia tantum nominals (e.g., *cosquillas*, “tickles”). We conclude that linguistic development of nominal plural inflection in Spanish is not restricted to its morphological and syntactic values, but also requires acquisition of the conceptual distinctions that underlie grammatical number.

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