

# Language over Mind *or* Mind over Language?

## *The Problem with Fuzzy Agreement*

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I know one of the waiters who was/were working at the restaurant last night. Which would you pick?

### 1. What did I do?

- Research topic: "fuzzy" subject-verb agreements
  - Looked at agreements, which can result in somewhat illogical semantic content
- Main Focus
  - An analysis of verb choices made by native English, French, and German speakers
- Aim of Project
  - Determine theories regarding the cause of fuzzy agreement & impact on communication

### 2. How did I go about this?

- Surveys in English, French and German (online & in person)

- Administration
  - English surveys: Wisconsin, USA
  - French surveys: PACA region, France
  - German surveys: Lower Austria & Styria, Austria

- Participants
  - Targeted participants: English, French and German native speakers
  - 50 participants per language, Ages 18+, male and female, any occupation

- Results
  - Over 200 participants - ages 12-84 - 10 different nationalities.
  - For this study only used native speakers ages 18+
  - Created four age groups: 18-30, 31-45, 45-60, 61+

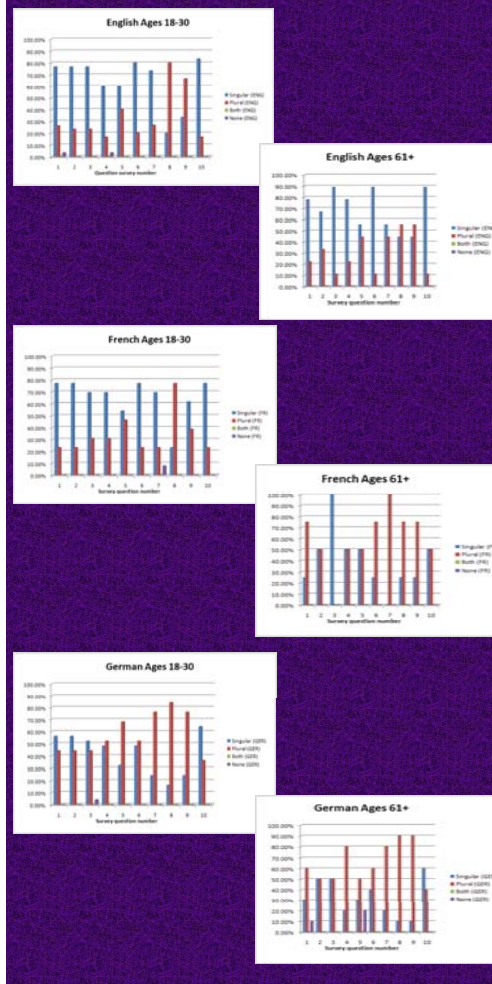
### 3. What did I find?

- English Speakers
  - High preference for singular
- French Speakers
  - Younger age groups: preference for singular
  - Gradual shift to preference for plural in older age groups
- German Speakers
  - High preference for plural, highest in older age groups
- Exceptions
  - Sentences 8, 9 triggered more plural responses across all ages and languages
  - whereas sentence 10 seemed to trigger singular responses

### References

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### Youngest vs. Oldest Age Groups



### 4. Why might this happen?

- Semantics (interpretation of the meaning of sentences)
  - Detail, specificity: use of modifiers such as *few, many, at least...*
  - Marcel den Dikken: *each, every* tend to trigger plural agreement
- Syntax (formation of sentences)
  - Proximity of "one of" phrase to relative clause

### 5. Conclusion

- Evident trends across languages
  - English: high singular preference
  - French: preference depends on age
  - German: high plural preference
- Evident trends in age groups' preferences
  - Younger age groups: singular
  - Older age groups: plural
- More research must be conducted before current questions can be answered.

### 6. Current Questions

- Could this be evidence of a language change?
- What role does one's native language/culture play?
- What role do proximity, detail, and specificity play?
- Is it possible that sometimes it's language that influences our thinking and *not vice versa*?

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