The Acquisition of Number Agreement in \textit{What BE these/those} Sentences under a Multidominance Framework

Rong Yin

Examining data from the CHILDES database, I find that children shift from using singular agreement (e.g., \textit{What is those?}) to using plural agreement (e.g., \textit{What are these?}) in \textit{What BE these/those} sentences. I argue that (i) both grammar and processing contribute to this shift; (ii) my analysis can be extended to explain Dillon et al (2014)’s findings regarding agreement attraction in adults’ processing of \textit{Which NP} sentences; and (iii) the agreement shift in child language and agreement attraction found in Dillon et al (2014) are better captured under a multidominance framework than under the copy theory of movement.

1. The Agreement Shift in Child Language
1.1. General Data

Data from the CHILDES database reveals an asymmetry in the use of the plural form of the copula \textit{BE} in child language when the subject is \textit{these/those} between declarative sentences (e.g., \textit{These/Those BE mine, These/Those BE toys, I don’t know what these/those BE}) and \textit{What BE these/those} sentences. This is shown in Table 1.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Subject = these/those} & \textbf{Singular form of BE} & \textbf{Plural form of BE} \\
\hline
\textbf{Declarative sentences} & 6 cases (0.47\%) & 1274 cases (99.53\%) \\
\hline
\textbf{What BE sentences} & 56 cases (23.24\%)\textsuperscript{1} & 185 cases (76.76\%) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Child Language}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{1} The singular agreement cases for \textit{What BE these/those} sentences also include 5 cases in which the structures are: \textit{What BE these/those + DP, where DP= little things, things (*2), little dots, and lettuce.} More discussion about these 5 cases can be found in Section 2.

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Based on Table 1, regarding *What BE these/those* sentences, the singular form of *BE* (e.g., *What is these?*) is used 23.24% of the time in child language. However, in the declarative sentences in child language, the singular form of *BE* (e.g., *These is big*) is used only 0.47% of the time.

### Table 2. Adult Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject = these/those</th>
<th>Singular form of BE</th>
<th>Plural form of BE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative sentences</td>
<td>5 cases (0.27%)</td>
<td>1863 cases (99.73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What BE</em> sentences</td>
<td>16 cases (1.84%)</td>
<td>854 cases (98.16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focusing on adult language in the CHILDES database, which is shown in Table 2, the singular form of *BE* is rarely used in both declarative sentences and *What BE these/those* sentences. The slightly higher usage of the singular form of *BE* in *What BE these/those* sentences than in declarative sentences in adult language is discussed in Section 5.

A combined summary of Table 1 and Table 2: Adults and children behave the same in using the plural agreement in declarative sentences when the subject is *these/those*; however, children use more singular forms of *BE* than adults in *What BE these/those* sentences. Thus, it has to be explained (i) why in child language there is more singular agreement in *What BE* sentences than in declarative sentences when there is a lack of input of singular agreement in *What BE these/those* sentences; (ii) why children and adults behave the same regarding declarative sentences but behave differently regarding *What BE these/those* sentences.

### 1.2. Individual Data

Taken individually, children display four agreement patterns in *What BE these/those* sentences can be found.

**Pattern (i):** No plural agreement in *What BE these/those* sentences throughout the recordings range. This pattern presents a clear singular agreement stage in child language. For instance, within the recordings range from 1;11.17 to 3;1.20 of Bloom/Peter, 9 cases of singular agreement were found and no plural agreement was found in *What BE these/those* sentences.

**Pattern (ii):** A shift from singular agreement to plural agreement. This pattern presents a transition from the singular agreement stage to a plural agreement stage. Example: Kuczaj/Abe. This child shows a stable usage of singular agreement in *What BE these/those* sentences for about 6 months. After the first usage of the plural agreement, he continues using plural agreement 4 times and uses singular agreement once in the recordings range. The studied
recordings range was from 2;4.24 to 5;0.11. A detailed summary of the data is shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Kuczaj/Abe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recordings Range</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2;4.24-5;0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pattern (iii):** Plural agreement used in *What BE these/those* throughout the recordings range. This pattern shows the plural agreement stage that is expected in adult language. Example: Belfast/Court. The studied recordings range is from 3;4.0 to 4;0.11. No singular agreement is found.

**Pattern (iv):** A mixture of singular and plural agreement. This pattern shows a transition stage when children start using plural agreement but still display a preference for singular agreement. Example: Manchester/Liz. The studied recordings range was from 2;0.28 to 2;6.12. Six cases of singular agreement and 3 cases of plural agreement were found in *What BE these/those* sentences.

Based on these four patterns, it seems that before using plural agreement in *What BE these/those* sentences as adults do, children start with singular agreement. This indicates that the 23.24% usage of singular agreement in Table 1 is not purely due to speech errors in child language. Children actually shift from using singular to using plural agreement in *What BE these/those* sentences. This has to be explained as a result of a change in their grammar.

### 1.3. Contracted and Non-contracted Forms

Focusing on the singular agreement form of *BE* in *What BE these/those* sentences, 8 cases of non-contracted forms and 48 cases of contracted forms were found. One might argue that the explanation for the singular agreement stage in child language is that children tend to produce sentences using the contracted forms *what’s* (maybe due to ease of pronunciation) even though they know the agreement should be plural.

This sounds reasonable at first; however, it actually amounts to saying that in child language there are phonological rules like *what+are=what’s*. Putting aside the legitimacy of such rules, they can only explain the four patterns described in the previous section by treating the agreement shift as actually being a shift from contracted forms (i.e., *what’s*) to non-contracted (i.e., *what are*) forms. However, this explanation falters if we look into other constructions like *What’s it/that/this*. For instance, during Manchester/Becky’s singular agreement stage (2;3.27-2;9.13) for *What BE these/those* sentences, there are 76 non-contracted forms and 129 contracted-forms; and there is no clear shift from contracted forms to non-contracted forms for *What BE it/that/this* sentences. It is
not reasonable to say that the contracted/non-contracted shift only exists in What *BE these/those* sentences but not in other What *BE* sentences.

In this sense, children might have a preference for using contracted forms, but the contracted forms still reflect their choice of singular/plural agreement.

### 1.4. Against a Frozen Structure Analysis

Another hypothesis about the data in Table 1 and Table 2 is *what’s/what is* is first learned by children as a unit, and they always start with a *wh*-question using *what’s/what is*, ignoring the singular/plural agreement. Similar claims can be found in O’Grady (1997). However, there is evidence showing that children don’t just remember *what’s/what is* or remember simple sentences like *What is this* as a whole. There are 27 cases of non-inverted *wh*-sentences (e.g., Bloom/Peter @3;1.20 *What is this?*) in the CHILDES database, which indicates that children do have underlying structures and experience word order shift in their grammar even for simple sentences like *What is this/What are these*. Moreover, frozen structure analysis must also assume that children have frozen “What does” in sentences like “*What does the cats have in it*” (Macwhin/Boys @4:00.24).

### 1.5. Against a Question Marker Analysis

Akmajian and Heny (1975) point out that children around 3 years old produce polar sentences starting with *is*, even though the auxiliary should be *are, should*, etc. (e.g., *Is I can do that?*). Similar claims can be found in Crain and Nakayama (1987). One of the explanations that Crain and Nakayama (1987) provide for sentences like *Is the boy who’s watching Mickey Mouse is happy?* is that children might simply insert *is* in the sentence initial position, and then repeat the assertion, ignoring agreement. In other words, the copula *is* works as a polar question marker, like *ma* in Mandarin.

Thus, another possible hypothesis is that children first treat *is* as a question marker in *wh*-sentences as well, and this question marker is not sensitive to agreement. At a later stage, children realize that *is* is not a question marker, and shift to plural agreement in What *BE these/those* sentences.

However, there are three reasons why *is* should not be analyzed as a question marker in *wh*-sentences.

First, cross-linguistically speaking, in adult language, polar question markers are not compatible with *wh*-questions. Even when *wh*-words and polar question markers can co-occur, the interrogative force of the *wh*-words disappears. For instance, in Mandarin, *wh*-words bear an indefinite meaning when they co-occur with polar question marker (cf. Li 1992). In other words, the copula *is* in What *BE these/those* sentences in the singular agreement stage is unlikely to be a question marker.

Second, treating *is* as a question marker in *wh*-sentences cannot extend to cases like “*What does the cats have in it*” (Macwhin/Boys @4:00.24), unless the
auxiliary *does* is assumed to be a question marker too. However, it is odd to assume that both *is* and *does* are question markers.

Third, most examples given in Akmajian & Heny (1975) and Crain & Nakayama (1987) have a doubled copula verb/auxiliary (e.g., *Is the boy who's watching Mickey Mouse is happy?*). In other words, the form of the examples in Akmajian & Heny (1975) and Crain & Nakayama (1987) is: *is* + an assertion, where the assertion contains its own copula/auxiliary. However, in Table 1, all the cases in the singular agreement stage involve only one copula verb (e.g., *What's these?*).

### 2. The Semantics and the Syntax of What BE these/those Sentences

According to Higgins (1973), sentences like (1a) are identificational copula sentences, typically relating the names of people or of things. Higgins (1973) also points out that the underlying structure of What BE these/those sentences involves an identificational copula sentence, and these/those must be its underlying subject. One of the arguments provided in Higgins (1973) is that sentences like *What/Who is that?* do not pass the inversion test, and this is compatible with the properties of identificational copula sentences. This is shown by examples (1a)-(2b) from Higgins (1973).

Mikkelsen (2005) makes a distinction between truncated clefts, as in (3a), and demonstrative equatives, as in (3b).

(1) a. That is a tiger.   
   b. *A Tiger is that.
(2) a. What can that be?   
   b. *What can be that?

From Higgins (1973)

(3) a. That is Susan.   
   b. That woman is Susan.

From Mikkelsen (2005)

In Mikkelsen (2005), *that* in (3a) has the semantic type <e,t> and denotes property; while *that woman* in (3b) has the semantic type <e> and denotes individual.

Combining Higgins (1973) and Mikkelsen (2005), I assume that (4) is identificational and the semantic types of *these* and *apples* are both <e,t>. In this sense, I further assume that the underlying structure of (5) is also identificational.

(4) These are apples.
(5) What are these?

Following the proposed structure for equative/identificational clauses in Rothstein (2001), I assume Structure 2 is the syntactic structure for What BE these/those sentences, derived from Structure 1, which is the underlying structure.
Another issue to address involves the structure of sentences like (6), which are also included among the singular agreement cases for *What BE these/those* sentences in Table 1.

According to Mikkelsen (2005), (5) and (6) should be treated differently, since *these things* in (6) has the semantic type $<e>$, but *these* in (5) has the semantic type $<e,t>$. Assuming the declarative counterpart of (6) is (7), and (7) is predicational according to the classification of copula sentences in Mikkelsen (2005), the structure of (6) should be like Structure 3, following Mikkelsen (2005).

(6) What are these things?
(7) These things are apples.

It can be seen that the only difference between Structure 2 and Structure 3 is the predicate phrase projected in Structure 3. Since the agreement shift I am looking at is only related to the parts where Structure 2 and Structure 3 overlap, I only focus on Structure 2, and assume that the analysis directly extends to Structure 3. Meanwhile, for ease of discussion, I ignore the V-to-I movement of the copula *BE*, and show the underlying structure beginning with the copula under I. Thus, I use Structure 4 (i.e., the simplified version of Structure 2) for the following discussion.

It is worth mentioning that if this is the only underlying structure for *What BE these/those* sentences in adult language, it is natural to assume that children share the same underlying structure in their grammar throughout the singular to plural agreement shift. In other words, it is odd to assume that children might have another interpretation of *What BE these/those* and thus have another
underlying structure; or to assume that children share the same interpretation of *What BE these/those as adults but have a different underlying structure.*

**Structure 3:**

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[Diagram of Structure 3]
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**Structure 4:**

```
[Diagram of Structure 4]
```
3. Copy Theory

In Section 1, I raised two questions: (i) why children and adults behave the same regarding declarative sentences but differently regarding *What BE these/those* sentences; (ii) why in child language there is more singular agreement in *What BE* sentences than in declarative sentences when there is a lack of input of singular agreement in *What BE these/those* sentences. In this section, I first propose an analysis using copy theory and then point out some problems for this analysis.

3.1. An Analysis Incorporating the Copy Theory of Movement

An answer to question (i) is that under a copy theory analysis in child language (i.e., the singular agreement stage), agreement happens after copying; while in adult language (i.e., the plural agreement stage), agreement happens before copying.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Language</th>
<th>Adult Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underlying structure: These BE what</td>
<td>Underlying structure: These BE what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Copying]: What BE these BE what</td>
<td>[Agreement]: These are what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Agreement]: What is these BE what</td>
<td>[Copying]: What are these are what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At PF: What is these BE what</td>
<td>At PF: What are these are what</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In child language, what is copied is the root copula *BE* without any number feature. The higher copy of the copula is able to agree with its specifier *what* and thus gets a [+singular] value, assuming that *what* carries a syntactically [+singular] value. However, in adult language, agreement always happens before copying, and thus what is copied is a copula with a number feature, namely *are*. The higher copy is not able to rewrite its number feature.

An answer to question (ii) is that for declarative sentences, there is no copying occurs. The copula *BE* can only agree with the subject *these/those* and get a [+plural] value. Thus, in child language, there is more singular agreement in *What BE* sentences than in declarative sentences. This is also why children and adults behave the same in declarative sentences. This is shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Language</th>
<th>Adult Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underlying structure: These BE apples</td>
<td>Underlying structure: These BE apples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Agreement]: These are apples</td>
<td>[Agreement]: These are apples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At PF: These are apples</td>
<td>At PF: These are apples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2. Problems

The first problem with a copy theory analysis is that it is unclear to me what triggers the shift from copy happening earlier to agreement happening earlier. In other words, how do children determine the order of doing copy and agreement?

Second, according to Kalin (2016), agreement happens after head movement in adult language. If she is right, the hypothesis that in adult language agreement happens before copying does not work. In order to explain the adult data when copying before agreement, the analysis must be that either (i) copying happens twice: the root is copied the first time and the plural feature is copied the second time; or (ii) the two copies are in an agree relationship. The first option seems to be very odd. The second option seems better; however, this option raises questions for explaining the child data: should the agree relationship between the lower and higher copy exist in child language too? If not, how do children acquire this agree relationship? If the agree relationship exists in child language, the analysis could be re-written as in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. The Updated Analysis Using Copy Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Language</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying structure: These BE what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Copying]:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What BE these BE what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Agreement]:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is these BE what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Two copies of the copula agree]:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is these is what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At PF: What is these is what</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 6, in child language, the higher copy is used to do agreement while in adult language, the lower copy is used to do agreement. However, it still unclear what triggers the shift from using the higher copy for agreement to using the lower copy for agreement.

Third, putting aside discussions in Kalin (2016), and assuming the analysis in Table 4, the predictions of Table 4 for child language are incompatible with the empirical data. This is shown in Table 7.

As shown in Table 7, sentences like *What these/those is* should not be predicted. However, I found 4 cases of this type of sentences in the CHILDES database:

(8) Suppes/Nina @ 2;3.18 *What those is?*
(9) Suppes/Nina @ 2;5.25 *know what these is?*
(10) Manchester/Liz @ 2;7.3 you tell me what these is.
(11) Manchester/Liz @ 2;7.3 can you tell me what these is?
Table 7. Predictions and Realizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whether found in CHILDES</th>
<th>Whether predicted by Copy Theory in Table 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this/that?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What this/that is?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is this/that is?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What these/those?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>What are these/those is?</td>
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<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are these/those is?</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I argue that (9)-(11), the embedded wh-sentences are real wh-questions with the copula covertly moving from I-to-C (more discussion can be found in Section 6).

It is possible that these four cases are pure speech errors that are the same as the errors children make when producing declarative clauses (e.g., *These is big). However, if these are not speech errors, and should be considered, the analysis in Table 4 cannot explain the existence of What these/those is. The reason is that when copying, only the feature of the lower copy can be copied to the higher one, not the other way around. The only way for the lower copy to get a [+singular] value is to agree with what, skipping its own specifier these/those. For now, I haven’t found independent evidence supporting this assumption.

Considering the problems posed by using copy theory, I suggest using a multidominance framework with the Same Path Processing Principle, which can better capture both the syntactic properties of the agreement shift and the acquisition path, connecting child language and adult language.

4. A Brief Introduction to Multidominance


According to Larson (2016), there are two possible ways of representing the way in which Merge (cf. Chomsky 1995) effects displacement: the Copy Theory of Movement and Multidominance. Larson (2016) points out that in Copy Theory, an entirely new term is created to represent displacement, which is shown in Structure 5; while under a multidominance framework, no new instance of the moving element is created, but the displaced element is introduced into a new position without vacating its old one, shown in Structure 6.
Thus, under a multidominance framework, Structure 4 is represented as Structure 7.

In Structure 7, the head I, namely the copula $BE$, is multidominated by $I'$ and $C_2$. DP$_2$ $what$ is also multidominated by $I'$ and CP$^2$. One consequence of the copula and $what$ being multidominated is that the copula $BE$ has two specifiers: Spec-CP (i.e., $what$) and Spec-IP (i.e., $these$). Following Kalin (2016), I assume that for both children and adults, agreement happens after head movement, and the consequence is that a decision has to be made about which specifier the copula should agree with. Agreeing with Spec-CP results in the copula getting a [+singular] value, while agreeing with Spec-IP results in the copula getting a [+plural] value.

5. The Same Path Processing Principle

I propose that under a multidominance framework, regarding $wh$-sentences, people prefer to choose the $wh$-word in Spec-CP as the specifier to agree with. I call this principle as the S(ame) P(ath) P(rocessing) Principle. I further claim that the SPP Principle interferes with syntactic grammar in both child and adult language.

The reason why the SPP Principle exists is that by choosing to agree with what’s in Spec-CP, agreement and linearization can both use the copula in the same position. Take Structure 7 as an example: agreement and linearization can both use the higher position of $I\ BE$, which results in What is these? Choosing the higher position to do linearization, but the lower position to do agreement has an increased processing cost, but results in the correct form What are these? As for declarative sentences (e.g. These/Those are…), the copula $BE$ is not multidominated and only has one specifier to agree with (i.e., these/those).

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2 See Johnson (2007) for an analysis of $wh$-phrases under a multidominance framework.
5.1. Child Data

A multidominance framework with the SPP Principle can explain the child data from Table 1 and the child data from individual cases in Section 1.2: at children’s earliest ages of acquiring English, the SPP Principle affects their grammar and they either form a grammar compatible with the SPP Principle or a grammar in which the copula agrees with the underlying subject (i.e., these/those) but the grammar is over-ridden by the SPP Principle, resulting in the copula agreeing with the wh-word.

I suggest that the former hypothesis that children at their early age form a grammar compatible with the SPP Principle should be adopted. The reason is that in Section 1, pattern (i) of having only singular agreement in What BE these/those sentences shows that children have a strong preference for using singular agreement, instead of competing between singular agreement and plural agreement. In other words, patterns (i)-(iv) seem to suggest that children start with a grammar where agreement occurs between the copula and the wh-word (i.e., pattern (i)) and change their grammar to one in which the copula agrees with the underlying subject but which is still affected by SPP Principle to some extent (i.e., patterns (ii)-(iv)).

This explains the two questions posed in Section 1: Since the copula only has one specifier to agree with in declarative sentences, children behave the same as adults. However, in What BE these/those sentences, there are two potential specifiers for the copula to agree with, children behave differently from adults because of the SPP Principle.

In addition, recall the data points (8)-(11) in Section 3.2 where the copula is pronounced after these/those and has a [+singular] value, they are actually predicted under a multidominance framework: the copula agrees with what but is accidentally pronounced at its lower position.

5.2. Data from Dillon et al (2014)

At the very beginning of this section, I claimed that the SPP Principle also affects adults, but the adult data in Table 1 seems to indicate that the SPP Principle does not affect adults (i.e., there are few singular agreement cases in What BE these/those for adults). I propose that the SPP Principle does affect adults but the strength of the SPP Principle may vary across different individuals and vary across different wh-words. “What” is probably a weak trigger for SPP Principle, and other morphologically more complex wh-words/phrases can be stronger triggers for the SPP Principle. Dillon et al (2014) focus on which NP phrases and the results of their experiments show adults behave similarly to children with which NP sentences. In Dillon et al (2014), adults vary in judging the grammaticality of sentences like (12) in both off-line and on-line tasks.

(12) Which flowers are/is the gardener planting?
Some people even insist that *are* is correct in (12), which is similar to pattern (i) in Section 1. Dillon et al. (2014) claim that both structural relationships (i.e., spec-head relationship) and linearization affect adults’ judgments about agreement in *Which NP* sentences. In this sense, the SPP Principle can explain agreement attraction in adults’ processing of *Which NP* sentences in Dillon et al. (2014): adults also have structure (7), and need to decide which specifier to agree with. Their grammar tells them to agree with the underlying syntactic subject (e.g., *the gardener* in example (12)), but the SPP Principle affects at best some adults and makes them choose the higher position of [I *BE*] for both agreement (i.e., agree with *which flowers*) and linearization as children do. In this sense, the fronted wh-phrase “*which DP*” maybe a stronger trigger than “*what*”, since it seems to activate the SPP Principle for adults. “*What*”, a weaker trigger, still activates the SPP Principle, which is shown in Table 2, but the activation is low.

6. Discussions and Problems

There are several issues that need to be addressed more.

First, throughout the paper, there is an implicit assumption that children observe a spec-head relationship when they do agreement. Although in Dillon et al. (2014), the experimental results show that a spec-head relationship plays a role in adults’ processing of *which DP* sentences, more independent evidence showing children also observe a spec-head relationship is needed.

Second, more evidence is needed to support the claim that data points (8)-(11) are not speech errors but actually produced by children’s grammar.

Third, regarding the strength of the SPP Principle, more types of *wh*-words/phrases need to be studied to see which aspects of the *wh*-words/phrases affect the SPP Principle. Is it just morphological complexity determines the strength of the SPP Principle?

Finally, it is assumed that syntactically *what* has a [+singular] feature. What about other *wh*-words, especially adjuncts like *where* and *why*? In the CHILDES database, I found that for the *wh*-word *why* when the underlying subject DP is plural, there are 4 cases of singular agreement (e.g., *Why’s honeys on there?*) and 20 cases of plural copula agreement. For the *wh*-word *where*, when the underlying subject DP is plural, there are 202 cases of singular copula agreement (e.g., *Where is the eggs?*) and 64 cases of plural copula agreement. It seems that in *why*-sentences and *where*-sentences, the copula fails to agree with the underlying subject too. It is very unlikely that *why* should semantically have a [+singular] value but it is unclear to me whether *why* can be assumed to syntactically have a [+singular] value. If it is not appropriate to assume *why* and *where* syntactically have a [+singular] value, an alternative way to explain the singular form of *BE* in *What*/*Where*/*Why*-sentences might be to say that *what*/*where*/*why* do not have a number feature, and the copula is assigned a default value [+singular] when agreement with *what* is attempted but fails. This might be why the SPP Principle does not seem to affect adults much in *What BE*
these/those sentences: having no number feature makes what a weak trigger for the SPP Principle.

References


Kalin, Laura. Morphological reversal in Amadiya (Neo-Aramaic) as late agreement. Talk at WCCFL 33.


