Processing differences between person and number: A view from feature theory

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The literature on processing of person and number agreement contains some apparently contradictory results. On the one hand, some ERP studies do not find a qualitative difference between the reaction to a person violation and the reaction to a number violation when an agreeing verb does not match the features of the subject, the controller of the agreement relation (Silva-Perreyra and Carreiras 2007, Zawiszewski et al. 2016). On the other hand, an ERP study reported in Mancini et al. 2011 did find a qualitative difference between agreement violations for person and agreement violations for number, a result further corroborated by an fMRI study reported in Mancini et al. 2017. At the same, all studies mentioned appear to find consistent results where it concerns quantitative differences between person violations and number violations: on the whole, the response to agreement violations for person is stronger than the response to number agreement violations. In this talk I will argue that the constellation of reported results can be accounted for by adopting a theory of person and number features that has the following two core properties: (i) pronouns are specified for both person and number, but R-expressions are specified for number only and do not carry any person specification; (ii) all of first, second and third person are characterized by one or more person features, whereas, in contrast, one of the numbers (singular) corresponds to the absence of number features.