What Omnivorous Agreement can teach us about the Theory of Syntax

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The term omnivorous agreement refers to the scenario where the marked member of an agreement paradigm can be triggered by the relevant feature on the SUBJECT, on the OBJECT, or both. Consider examples (1a–b), from the Agent Focus (AF) construction in Kaqchikel (Mayan):

**NOTE:** The facts shown here hold, with minor modifications, in K’ichee’ (the other member of the Quichean branch of Mayan languages), as well.

(1) a. ja FOC you PRFV-\textbf{2ABS}-hate-\textbf{AF} the man
   ‘It was you that hated the man.’

   b. ja FOC the man PRFV-\textbf{2ABS}-hate-\textbf{AF} you
   ‘It was the man that hated you.’

We can tell that this is not a case of homophony between SUBJECT and OBJECT agreement markers—or even a case of a SUBJECT marker and OBJECT marker competing for a single slot—by observing the behavior of regular transitives:

(2) a. rat you PRFV-\textbf{3ABS}-\textbf{2ERG}-hate the man
   ‘You hated the man.’

   b. ri the man PRFV-\textbf{2ABS}-\textbf{3ERG}-see you
   ‘The man hated you.’

The SUBJECT 2nd-person marker is -aw-, and it is perfectly able to appear between the aspect-marker x- and the verbal root il (“see”), (2a); but in the Agent-Focus construction, when the SUBJECT is 2nd-person (1a), it is -at- that appears.

Let us therefore consider how the pattern in (1a–b) arises. I assume that at the relevant stage in the derivation, both SUBJECT and OBJECT are located below the probe (Infl\textsuperscript{0}):

(3) 1ST/2ND-PERSON SUBJECT

(4) 3RD-PERSON SUBJECT, 1ST/2ND-PERSON OBJECT

I will assume that in a case like (4), the probe does not agree with the SUBJECT en route to agreeing with the OBJECT—i.e., that we are not dealing with Multiple Agreement, but rather Single Agreement. Support for this comes from the following restriction, observed by Davies and Sam-Colop (1990): in the Agent-Focus construction, at most one argument can be 1st/2nd-person. If 1st/2nd-person arguments—but crucially, not 3rd-person ones—must be licensed by entering into a formal relation with some functional category (Béjar and Rezac’s 2003, 2009 Person Licensing Condition, or PLC), and the relation that underlies cases like (3–4) is one of Single Agreement, it follows straightforwardly that at most one 1st/2nd-person argument will ever be licensed in this construction.
Consider now Agent-Focus cases like (5), involving two 3rd-person arguments:

(5) ja ri  tz'i' x-φ-etzela-n  ri sian  
   FOC the dog  PRFV-3ABS-hate-AF the cat  
   ‘It was the dog that hated the cat.’

Suppose that agreement is driven by “derivational time-bombs”—elements of the initial representation that cannot be part of a well-formed, end-of-the-derivation representation, and that are eliminated from the representation by the agreement operation. An approach of this sort is the un/interpretable features approach of Chomsky (2000, 2001).

If Infl⁰ were to carry such derivational time-bombs, what would be their fate in (5)? Crucially, given the Single Agreement model motivated above, the assumption that 3rd-person phrases are legitimate targets for agreement with Infl⁰ falsely rules out the omnivorous person effects in (1a–b): the probe would not be able to look past a 3rd-person SUBJECT to agree with the OBJECT. In fact, any account of (5) that resorts to successful agreement with some 3rd-person target (e.g., a covert expletive) would require 3rd-person nodes to be legitimate targets for the relevant agreement relation, and thus would run afoul of data like (1b).

Instead, we are forced to assume that the probe in (5) has searched past the SUBJECT and the OBJECT, failing to find a 1st/2nd-person target. This means that any derivational time-bombs found on Infl⁰ would remain in their “crash”-inducing state—falsely predicting ungrammaticality for (5).

Of course, one cannot just “opt out” of agreement (when agreement is possible)—even in Kaqchikel; but given the current results, a theory in which the obligatory status of agreement is rooted in derivational time-bombs (e.g., the Chomsky 2000, 2001 system) is empirically untenable. Even if we maintain that agreement is driven by uninterpretable features, we must abandon the assumption that their presence is cause for ungrammaticality; and thus, we must derive the obligatory status of agreement in some other fashion—for example, ascribing obligatory status to the very attempt to establish agreement, rather than to its successful culmination.

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Selected References


