**Agreement with Disjunction**

*keywords: disjunction, number agreement, dependent plurals, multiplicity implicature*

1. **Puzzle**

In Russian, when the subject is a disjunction and both disjuncts are singular, plural agreement on the verb is ruled out as shown in (1):

(1) Petja ili Vasja prišel/*prišli.
    Petja.SG or Vasja.SG come.PAST.SG/com.PAST.PL
    Petja or Vasja came.

However, in some environments plural agreement becomes possible as shown in (2):

(2) Po vtornikam Petja ili Vasja prixodit/prixodjat k Nataše.
    on Tuesdays Petja or Vasja come.SG/com.PL to Natasha
    On Tuesdays Petja or Vasja comes to Natasha.

Environments that license plural agreement include frequency adverbials and modals. These must scope over the disjunction. E.g., plural agreement in (2) is ruled out under the wide scope interpretation of disjunction: if every Tuesday the same person is coming to Natasha, but the speaker is unsure who exactly it is, only singular agreement is good. The goal of the paper is to explain the difference between (1) and (2).

2. **Agreement with Disjunction and Dependent Plurality**

The intuition I pursue is that cases like (2) with plural agreement are very similar to dependent plural cases like (3), as discussed by Zweig 2009.

(3) Five students attend good schools.

(3) requires that each of the five students attend one or more good schools; at the same time it is required that more than one school is referred to overall. If all the five students attend the same school, (4) must be used:

(4) Five students attend a good school.

Zweig notes that dependent plural reading also arises in sentences with quantificational adverbs like (5):

(5) John always wears sweaters.

(5) requires that John wear different sweaters, but not that he wear more than one at a time.

Similarly to the cases discussed by Zweig, sentence (2) with plural agreement on the verb requires that each Tuesday one of the guys come to Natasha, while at the same time it is inappropriate if each Tuesday, it is the same person who is coming. In such a scenario, we must use (2) with singular agreement on the verb.
3. Sketch of an Analysis

I follow Zweig in assuming that bare plurals are number neutral predicates and the “more than one” component arises as a scalar implicature, based on the scalar relationship between the bare plural and its singular alternative. I am also adopting his method for calculating this multiplicity implicature. The correlation with bare plurals described above leads to the following hypothesis: disjunction can have plural feature, thus triggering plural verb agreement. When it has a plural feature, it behaves similar to bare plurals. Specifically, disjunction with a plural feature \((A \lor B)_{pl}\) is a predicate closed under the sum operation, which, following Zweig’s logic, gives rise to the multiplicity implicature. How can then the contrast between (1) and (2) be accounted for?

The key idea is that sentences like (1) have two implicatures: on the one hand, a multiplicity implicature generated by plural feature; on the other hand, an exclusivity implicature generated by the scalar item or. I assume that the implicature calculation is obligatory. (Whereas the idea that the implicature generated by plural morphology is obligatory is not new (see Spector 2007, Chierchia, Fox&Spector (to appear)), the idea about the obligatoriness of the implicature generated by disjunction is rather stipulative and needs some further investigation). The two implicatures are informally represented in (a) and (b):

(1) [Petja or Vasja]_{pl} came.

a. Petja or Vasja came and it’s not true that only Petja came and it’s not true that only Vasja came = Petja and Vasja came.

b. Petja or Vasja came and it’s not true that Petja and Vasja came.

These two implicatures obviously contradict each other, which I take to explain why the plural feature on disjunction and hence the plural agreement on the verb is blocked in sentences like (1).

Let’s now look at cases like (2).

(2) On Tuesdays [Petja or Vasja]_{pl} come.

The multiplicity implicature we get in this case is shown in (a); the exclusivity implicature is given in (b):

a. On Tuesdays Petja or Vasja come and it’s not true that on Tuesdays Petja comes and it’s not true that on Tuesdays Vasja comes.

b. On Tuesdays Petja or Vasja come and it’s not true that on Tuesdays Petja and Vasja come.

In this case, the two implicatures are consistent with each other, giving rise exactly to the dependent plural meaning: both boys have to come overall, but on no Tuesday, both boys have to come.

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References

