

Defacing Agreement

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Recently there has been renewed interest in agreement features in the setting of constraint-based theories like LFG and HPSG, with some doubts expressed as to how many sets of features are needed to account for agreement phenomena. Alsina and Arsenijević (2012a, b), for instance, argue that it is extravagant to work with Wechsler and Zlatić's (2000: 800; 2003; 2012) proposal involving three sets of features, namely concord, index and semantics. In Wechsler and Zlatić's model, concord and index both belong to syntax, the former more closely related to morphological declension and the latter more closely reflecting semantics, with semantic features forming a separate category. The motivation for this apparent proliferation of features comes from Serbian/Croatian nouns like *deca* 'children' and *braća* 'brothers', which are said to agree with feminine singular attributive targets (concord agreement), neuter plural verbs and pronouns (index agreement) and, potentially, masculine plural pronouns (semantic/pragmatic agreement).

Alsina and Arsenijević (2012a, b) believe that, rather than having three faces, agreement has only two – traditionally referred to as syntactic versus semantic agreement (or grammatical versus notional agreement/concord). The first accusation they level at Wechsler and Zlatić's trichotomy is that it gives rise to rampant redundancy and complexity, predicting that there would be numerous classes of nouns based on all the possible combinations of features, though in reality, only a handful of those classes have any members in them. In addition, it is deemed suspicious that most nouns, even in Serbian/Croatian, should have the same values for all their feature sets.

The present paper aims to justify the need for at least three agreement feature sets. In the first place, redundancy is often misguided as criticism, especially in the light of agreement, which could be viewed as superfluous linguistic luxury itself. Secondly, many of the putative classes of nouns with no members in them can be independently ruled out by Corbett's (1983) agreement hierarchies, which, roughly speaking, anticipate increasingly semantics-based agreement the further away from the controller the target is located; the system can be further streamlined by postulating default principles of feature inheritance. In addition, as Wechsler and Zlatić (2012: 384) point out, Alsina and Arsenijević's alternative proposal creates as much complexity as the original one which it is meant to replace.

Thirdly, this paper sets out to demonstrate that Alsina and Arsenijević's treatment rests on some rather problematic assumptions regarding the Serbian/Croatian data, which go against Corbett's (1983 and elsewhere) otherwise typologically and empirically sound generalisations of how agreement works. Therefore Alsina and Arsenijević do not provide a viable solution that can be squared with the evidence, some of which is presented in (1) below.

(1) Sreo sam braću_i. Ona_i su došla.
met.M.SG AUX.1SG brothers they.F.SG/N.PL AUX.PL came.F.SG/N.PL
'I met the brothers. They came.'
[Alsina and Arsenijević (2012a: 372)]

On the analysis involving only two agreement feature sets, *braća* is thought to be syntactically feminine singular and semantically masculine plural (Alsina and Arsenijević 2012a: 373), so the morphologically ambiguous pronoun *ona* in (1), as well as the participle of the lexical verb, would have to be feminine singular, as opposed to neuter plural, the latter being Wechsler and Zlatić's and Corbett's analysis. Crucially, the pronoun *ona* and the participle in (1) cannot be feminine singular in the environment of a plural finite verb, in line with Corbett's (1983: 88) robust Predicate Hierarchy. Following Corbett's empirically tested typological generalisations, both targets should be analysed as neuter plural here, and nothing else, unless one wants to make the unjustified claim that Serbian/Croatian has pronouns and participles with mismatched F.SG and N.PL features.

Finally, a case for at least three agreement features can even be made on the basis of a language as morphologically impoverished and as ‘unexotic’ as English (see Hristov 2012: Chapter 5). This case is built on the following premises:

- (a) **NP-internal English targets** seem to exhibit concord (i.e. more morphologically sensitive) agreement. Putative counter-examples like *another few weeks/this 12 pounds*, etc. are only admitted in the presence of a word such as *few* or *twelve* which has no plural morphology. Concord agreement in the NP-internal domain is also supported by coordination data: *this boy and girl* is ok, but **these boy and girl* is not because neither noun is morphologically plural (see King and Dalrymple 2004).
- (b) By contrast, **subject-verb agreement** in English appeals to the index feature. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain why a singular verb is incompatible with a subject like *this boy and girl* (again, as per King and Dalrymple 2004). Potential counter-examples are due to a possible singular interpretation, i.e. index: *none of them is/are*, *my friend and colleague is/are*, *Eggs is my favourite breakfast*, *12 pounds is a lot to pay for that*, etc. (see Hristov 2012).
- (c) In view of these observations, **collective nouns** such as *government*, *family* or *committee* must have singular concord in both British English and North American English, since they only admit singular NP-internal dependents (**these government/family*). Subject-verb agreement suggests that British speakers are happy either with a singular or with a plural index, whereas Americans usually admit only singular verbs¹. On the other hand, both varieties readily accept singular, as well as plural, personal pronouns. The most economical account that takes into consideration the feature values in the different domains and varieties would have to assign the value combinations to at least three separate features, as summarised in the table below (see Hristov 2012: Chapter 5).

Table 1: Agreement with collective nouns in English

	NP-internal agreement: CONCORD	Subject-verb agreement: INDEX	Pronominal agreement: SEMANTICS
BrE	SG	SG/PL	SG/PL
NAmE	SG	SG	SG/PL

The alternative proposal, whereby we have only two types of agreement – syntactic (SG) vs. semantic (PL), would leave it as a total mystery why no speakers seem to tolerate either syntactic (SG) or semantic (PL) verb agreement when the subject is a conjoined phrase of the type of *this boy and girl*; so a collective noun must have mismatched index, as opposed to allowing index or concord agreement with the verb. In conclusion, both case studies confirm the “three-faced” nature of agreement, as does a similar case study of Bulgarian.

References

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¹It should be acknowledged that both singular and plural subject-verb agreement occur in both BrE and NAmE. However, as of 13.02.2013, a search for the string *the committee have*, for instance, returns 10 relevant hits from the British National Corpus (100 million words), and only 1 relevant hit from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (450 million words).