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AGREEMENT. [This entry includes the following sub-entries:

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Overview

Agreement is a widespread and varied phenomenon in the world’s languages. It has been investigated from different viewpoints, yet it remains deeply puzzling. Consider these Russian examples:

(1) Tanja sidel-a u okna
   Tanya sat-SG.FEM by window
   ‘Tanya was sitting by the window’

(2) Djadja Vanja side! u okna
   Uncle Vanya sat-SG.MASC by window
   ‘Uncle Vanya was sitting by the window’

The form of the verb varies according to the subject noun phrase. This matching is the essential element of agreement. A working definition is provided by Steele: “The term agreement commonly refers to some systematic covariance between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another” (1978:610).

In our examples, the form of the verb covaries systematically according to a semantic property, namely whether the subject noun phrase denotes a female or a male. This agreement in gender can equally apply to a formal property:

(3) kniga ležal-a na stole
   book lay-SG.FEM on table
   ‘the book was lying on the table’

(4) žurnal ležal na stole
   magazine lay-SG.MASC on table
   ‘the magazine was lying on the table’

In (3), kniga ‘book’ controls feminine agreement; it belongs to the feminine gender because of its morphology, not for any semantic reason. Conversely, in (4), žurnal ‘magazine’ is masculine. The surprising thing is that we have information about the noun phrase expressed elsewhere—on the verb, in this case—and that this information is redundant.

Agreement is an area in which terms require care. For instance, some writers treat “agreement” and “concord”
as synonymous; for others, the two are distinct (whether “agreement” is treated as the superordinate term or the subordinate term, or with some other distinction between the two). “Concord” appears to be dropping out of use, and since there is no distinction that is drawn consistently, this loss is to be welcomed.

Connected to the problem of terms is that of the scope of agreement. Suppose our first example continues with a clause having the subject on-a ‘she’ (example [2] would correspondingly continue with on ‘he’). Would this systematic covariance count as agreement? For linguists interested specifically in agreement, typically it would: they say that personal pronouns agree as do verbs and adjectives, for example. Others, however, treat agreement as a type of local dependency, excluding covariance that goes beyond the clause. Barlow 1992:134–152 discusses this issue and concludes that there are no good grounds for distinguishing between agreement and antecedent–anaphor relations. Whatever one’s view, it is important to realize that “agreement” is a larger or smaller phenomenon for different linguists.

Within agreement, we call the element that determines the agreement (say, the subject noun phrase) the controller. The element whose form is determined by agreement is the target. The syntactic environment in which agreement occurs is the domain of agreement. When we indicate in what respect there is agreement, we are referring to agreement features. Thus, number is an agreement feature, and it has the values singular, dual, plural, and so on. This is diagrammed in Figure 1.

Each of these elements shows a range of possibilities, which will need elucidation before we achieve a full typology. The controller is typically a noun phrase, but there are various complications involving quantified expressions and conjoined noun phrases. We are used to adjectives and verbs being potential targets, and pronouns too; but we also find articles, demonstratives, numerals, possessives, adverbs, and adpositions as targets (see Lehmann 1982:207–215 and Corbett 1991:106–112 for examples). Given a list of controllers and one of targets, why would we also need the notion of domain? This is needed because targets may behave differently in different syntactic environments; for instance, German adjectives agree when in attributive position but not when in the predicate. Specifying the possible domains cross-linguistically is a major task of current research. The prototypical agreement features are gender, number, and person, with honorificity as a rare possibility. The interesting feature effects in conjoined constructions have been investigated by Givón 1970 and Corbett 1991:261–306. There is a fifth area of differentiation between languages, that of conditions: a particular agreement may be made possible or impossible by conditioning factors that are not themselves agreement features in the language in question. The conditions most often encountered are animacy, precedence, and definiteness.

Although in many instances only one agreement form is possible, there are also many cases in which agreement choices may be made, as discussed by Comrie 1975 and Corbett 2000:187–218. Investigation into the origin and development of agreement systems was given a flying start by Givón 1976, but that research has not been followed up as fully as might have been hoped (see Corbett 1995 for discussion).

The prospects for research into agreement include careful description of some of the richer systems (for instance, those of the languages of Daghestan, as in Polinsky and Comrie 1999), a fuller account of the rise of agreement systems, a more adequate general typology, and collaborative work with psycholinguists. Interest in the topic among psycholinguists has generally been limited so far to the more transparent kinds of agreement.

There is a considerable literature on agreement. For a list of monographs and collections, see the introduction to Corbett 1999. Important overviews include Moravcsik 1978 and Lehmann 1982. Formal approaches can be found in Pollard and Sag 1994:60–99 and Bresnan 2001:144–179.

[See also Adjectives; Case; Morphology; Syntactic Features; Verbs; and Word Orders.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Noun Classification

Widespread among the languages of the world is a partly or fully grammaticalized division of the noun lexicon into distinct classes. Several types of noun classification are traditionally distinguished (Allan 1977, Dixon 1982); the most distinctive are noun classes, numeral classifiers, classificatory verbs, and classificatory noun incorporation. Typical examples of classificatory noun incorporation are provided by Iroquoian languages (e.g. Cayuga): a taxonomically superordinate (generic) noun, for example, 'vehicle', is syntactically incorporated into the verb, and cross-classes a specific noun ('truck,' 'bus') which is syntactically governed by the verb (Mitchun 1986). Athabaskan languages (e.g. Navajo) have classificatory verbs, whose roots provide a semantically transparent classification of the intransitive subject or transitive object (Young and Morgan 1987).

Such classification provides information about the referent, for example, animacy, shape, texture, and grouping, in a way quite reminiscent of the distinctions made by the numeral classifiers found in Sino-Tibetan and other East Asian languages (Erbaugh 1986), and in the Mayan languages of Central America (Craig 1986a), among others. A numeral classifier system is an open set of classificatory particles which are syntactically associated with numerals (in some languages, morphologically bound to them); they may also be associated with demonstratives, adjectives, or the noun itself. Typically, the particle appears once in the N[oun] P[hrase]; however, agreement across elements of an NP does occur (e.g. in Thai or Kilivila). Particles may occur anaphorically in pragmatically focused (e.g. contrastive) discourse contexts. Although classifiers and nouns have distinctive syntactic positions in the NP, there is a lexical continuum from classifiers to full nouns: at least some classifiers in a system may be phonologically related (or identical) to nouns in the language. Numeral classifiers typically provide information about physical properties (e.g. animacy, shape, consistency, or arrangement), functional properties (tool, foodstuff, etc.), or the social status of the referent of the head noun—but not about sex (Denny 1976).

In contrast with numeral classifiers, noun class systems are characterized by agreement with constituents outside the NP (e.g. with verbs, predicate adjectives, locative deictics, or pronouns); by a higher degree of grammaticalization, evident in a closed system of a small number of classes; and by a lesser degree of semantic transparency. In discourse, the agreement marking on verbs and pronouns typically fulfills the unmarked anaphoric function of maintaining referential continuity. Noun class systems are especially evident in Indo-European, Semitic, African (all families), and Caucasian languages. In many of these systems, the salient semantic basis of classification is the distinction between male and female sex; hence they are called "gender systems." The Niger-Congo languages of Africa (Heine 1982), particularly the Benue-Congo family (Hyman 1980), provide examples of noun class systems which are not based on sex, but are otherwise quite similar to gender systems in having low semanticity, closed classes, and agreement.

The study of gender goes back to the Greek philosophical roots of linguistics, with a continuous tradition of research and commentary up to the present (see Claudi 1985); scholars have focused on the issue of whether the membership of individual classes is conceptually motivated or arbitrary. Grimm 1890 championed the "Romantic" claim that IE gender categorization, both in its origins and its current state, is based on an extension of...