

DISCONTINUOUS AGREE: VERBAL -S IN NORTH EASTERN ENGLISH



Robert Fritzsche (Leipzig University)
r.fritzsche@studserv.uni-leipzig.de • lingbuzz/005525
CGSW36 • The University of Chicago • October 14–15 2022



UNIVERSITÄT
LEIPZIG

1 Overview

North Eastern English (NEE) differs from Standard English (StE) with respect to agreement: 3SG agreement marking (“verbal -s”) is triggered by non-3SG subjects provided that they are not personal pronouns (the so-called Northern Subject Rule; NSR).

- (1) *Northern Subject Rule (NSR; Childs 2012: 319–320):*
Verbal -s can occur with non-3SG subjects under the following conditions:
a. *Type-of-Subject Constraint (TSC):* The subject is not a personal pronoun.
b. *Position-of-Subject Constraint (PSC):* A personal pronoun subject and the verb are non-adjacent.

I propose an analysis on the basis of ordering feature-driven operations: In NEE, internal Merge intervenes between two instances of Agree, bleeding number agreement in the case of non-pronominal subjects resulting in verbal -s.

2 Data

A qualitative corpus study of the *Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English 2* (NECTE2; Corrigan et al. 2012; 366,062 word tokens) reveals the following environments in which verbal -s surfaces: (i) lexical verbs with full DP subjects (2a); (ii) raising verbs with full DP subjects (2b) and (iii) in embedded clauses with the relative pronouns referring to a plural entity (2c).

- (2) a. It's like two of these new skates **weighs** like half of the one I've got.
b. their wages **is** out of this world
c. these clubs what's paying this well they must be making the money to pay it out
d. All of our costumes **was** just getting dragged off and we **were** all fighting and stuff.

Verbal -s is not observable in cases where the subject of the clause is a non-3SG personal pronoun, as shown in the second clause in (2d). Instances of verbal -s with non-adjacent pronoun subjects (i.e. evidence for the PSC) were not found in the corpus. The absence of the PSC in contemporary data is confirmed by Cole (2008) and Buchstaller et al. (2013).

3 Proposal

Agreement variation is due to the necessity to order features on a given head. In StE both probes on T are ordered back-to-back before the structure-building feature (3a). In the NEE on the other hand, internal Merge intervenes between $[\ast\pi\ast]$ - and $[\ast\#\ast]$ -Agree (3b). Optionality of verbal -s and standard agreement in NEE is due to the possibility of both orderings.

- (3) a. *StE ordering:* $[\ast\pi\ast] \succ [\ast\#\ast] \succ [\bullet D\bullet]$ b. *NEE ordering:* $[\ast\pi\ast] \succ [\bullet D\bullet] \succ [\ast\#\ast]$

The relative order between movement and number agreement results in variation between StE and NEE with respect to verbal -s. In NEE, movement bleeds full agreement, while in StE number agreement is counter-bleed by subsequent subject movement.

4 Assumptions

Syntactic operations

Elementary syntactic operations are feature-driven (Chomsky 2000, 2001): (internal) Merge is triggered by structure-building features $[\bullet F\bullet]$, while Agree is triggered by unvalued probes $[\ast F\ast]$ (notation from Heck & Müller 2007). Agree values the probe according to the value on the closest c-commanded goal. Following Preminger (2014) probes can be left unvalued without the derivation crashing. As operations apply sequentially, features on a given head have to be ordered according to language-specific parameters. This derives cross-linguistic variation (Heck & Müller 2007; Georgi 2017). Crucially, instead of a uniform φ -probe, there are $[\ast\pi\ast]$ (person) and $[\ast\#\ast]$ (number) probes, as both features can be valued independently (cf. Laka 1993; Taraldsen 1995; Tortora 1998; Béjar 2003; Sigurðsson 2004 i.a.).

Pronominal head movement

On the basis of bare phrase structure (Chomsky 1995), personal pronouns are minimal and maximal at the same time as they do not project any further ($D^{\min/\max}$; cf. Muysken & van Riemsdijk 1986 and van Riemsdijk 1998). Thus having characteristics of both phrases and heads, they should be able to undergo head-movement (cf. Déprez 1994).

Pronominal head-movement is supported by different movement restrictions for pronominal and full DP subjects in English locative inversions (Collins 1997): pronouns can move to T despite of material in Spec/TP, while DPs cannot (4).

- (4) a. John came down the hill. d. He came down the hill.
b. Down the hill came John. e. *Down the hill came he.
c. *Down the hill John came. f. ?Down the hill he came.

An obvious problem of pronominal head-movement arises in the face of T-to-C movement with subject-auxiliary inversion: Clearly, only the auxiliary moves to C, while a T-adjoined pronoun cannot be pied-piped. A solution in terms of exorporation of the lower T is offered in Fritzsche (2022: 8–10).

Morphology

The Subset Principle (Halle 1997) is formulated in such a way that the most specific exponent that does not bear non-matching information is inserted into a syntactic context:

- (5) A Vocabulary item V is chosen for a syntactic context S iff (a) and (b) hold.
a. For all features of V there is a matching feature in S without a conflicting feature value.
b. V is the most specific Vocabulary item among those that satisfy (5a).

Thus, the feature has to be present, but it can be unvalued. The formulation in (5) is still compatible with impoverishment, as this involves feature deletion in a syntactic context: The features on the VI not longer match the features of the context and the VI is not inserted. The Vocabulary items for English present tense T are stated in (6).

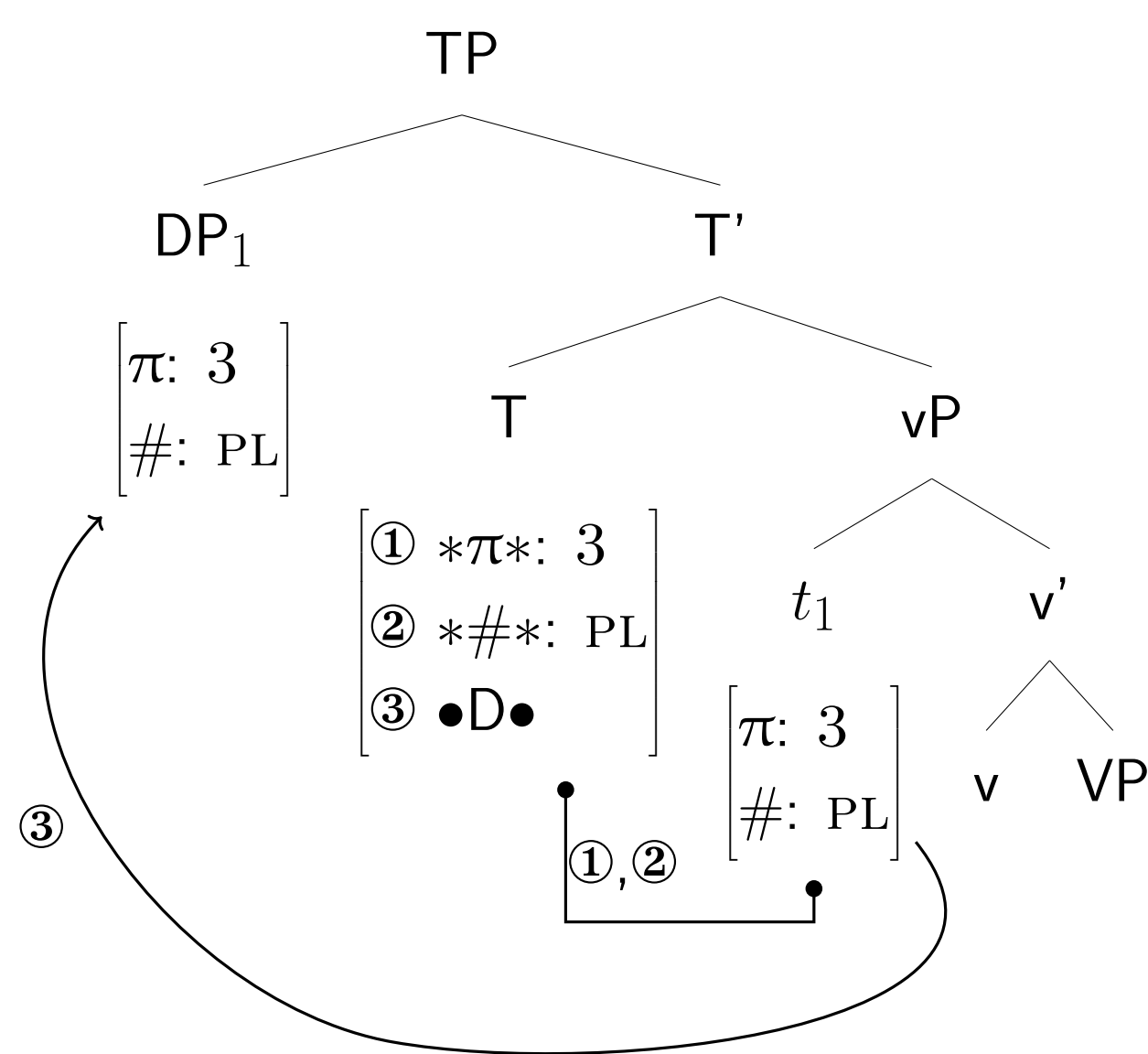
- (6) $-s \leftrightarrow [+3, -pl]$ 3sg pres
 $\emptyset \leftrightarrow []$ elsewhere

5 Discontinuous Agree

Canonical agreement in StE ($[\ast\pi\ast] \succ [\ast\#\ast] \succ [\bullet D\bullet]$)

T successfully probes for $[\ast\pi\ast]$ and $[\ast\#\ast]$ in its c-command domain (①, ②). Subsequently, the subject DP moves to Spec/TP and satisfies $[\bullet D\bullet]$ on T (③). As both probes on T are valued and the elsewhere exponent \emptyset is inserted during morphology: $T[\pi : +3, \# : +pl] \rightarrow \emptyset$.

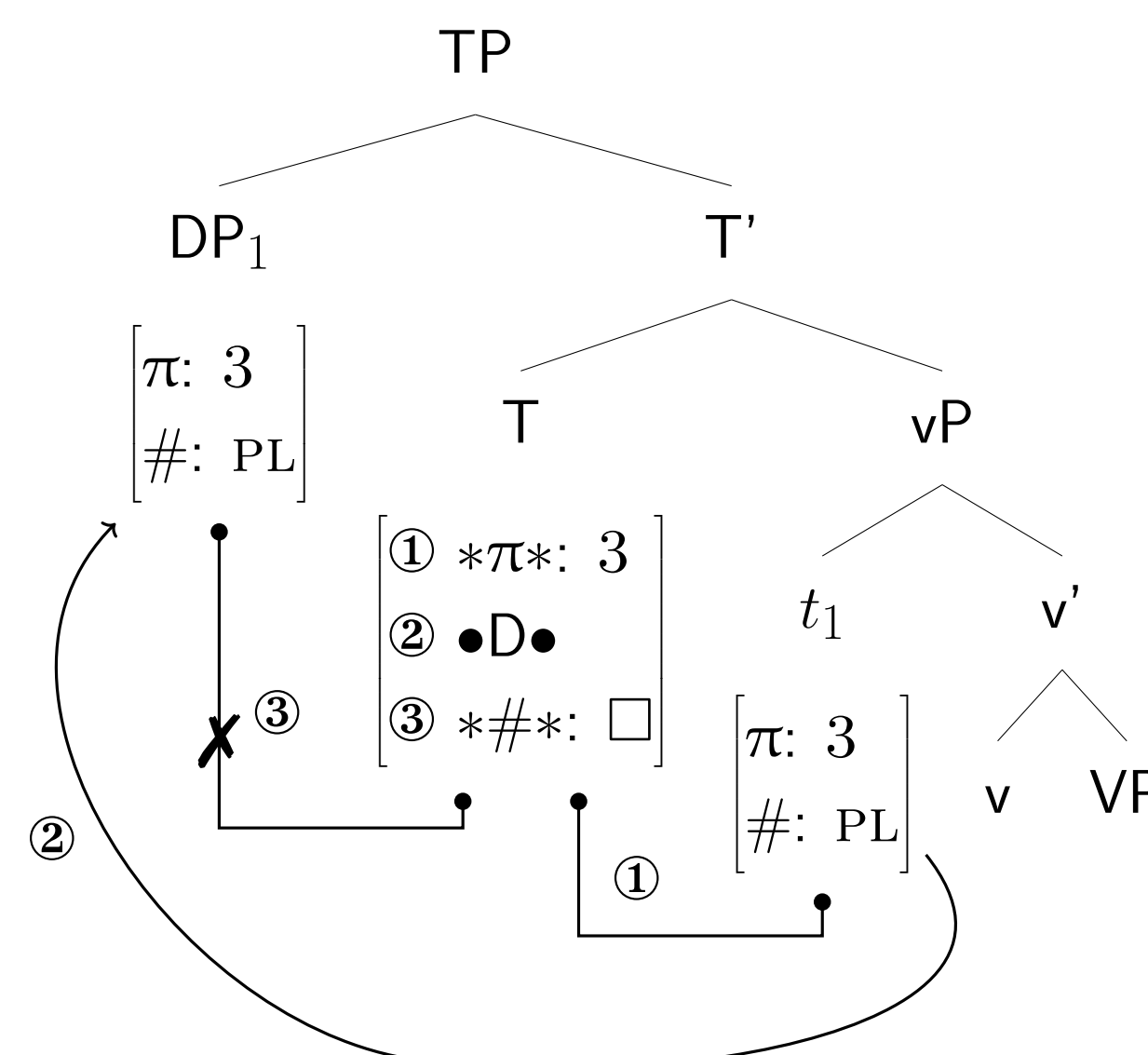
- (7) a. Two of these new skates weigh like half of the one I've got.
b.



Verbal -s in NEE ($[\ast\pi\ast] \succ [\bullet D\bullet] \succ [\ast\#\ast]$)

Again, T successfully probes for $[\ast\pi\ast]$ in its c-command domain (①). Next, the full DP subject moves to Spec/TP (②). In turn, #-Agree is bled by internal Merge, as the DP is no longer in T's search space (③). Given the Subset Principle in (5), -s is inserted in post-syntactic morphology: $T[\pi : +3, \# : \square] \rightarrow -s$.

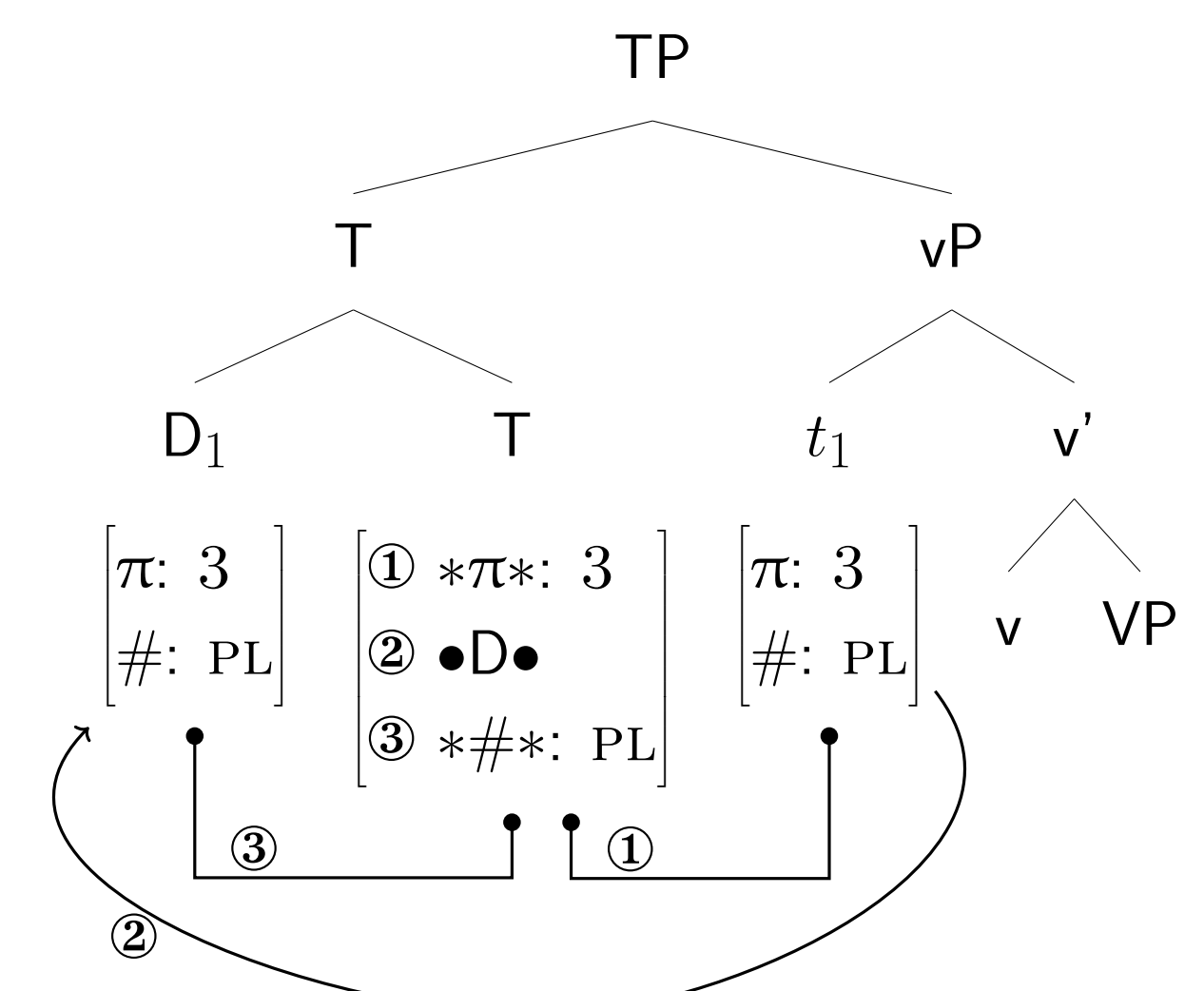
- (8) a. Two of these new skates weighs like half of the one I've got.
b.



No verbal -s with pronominal subjects in NEE

T agrees with the pronominal $D^{\min/\max}$ for $[\pi]$ (①). $D^{\min/\max}$ is able to head-adjoin to T, satisfying $[\bullet D\bullet]$ on T (②). Crucially, after pronominal head-movement $D^{\min/\max}$ is still in T's c-command domain and $[\ast\#\ast]$ -probing is successful (③). Consequently, -s is not compatible with $T[\pi : +3, \# : +PL]$ and \emptyset is inserted in morphology.

- (9) a. They weigh like half of the one I've got.
b.



6 Conclusion

The NSR in NEE follows from the requirement to order elementary operations and splitting up φ -Agree into two separate operations. Agreement variation between NEE and Standard English is due to different ordering statements on T. The full DP/pronoun split in NEE is explained by pronominal head movement to T. Moreover, the study confirms previous findings (Cole 2008; Childs 2012; Buchstaller et al. 2013) about the contemporary nature of the NSR without an intact adjacency condition (i.e. the PSC).

References

For a list of references see Fritzsche (2022), available at lingbuzz/005525.