

Reversing agreement is untenable: A reply to Zeijlstra

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MIT / Harvard — January 2012

1. Introduction

In a recent manuscript (*There is Only One Way to Agree*), Zeijlstra (2012) argues that agreement should be uniformly construed as in (1), below:

- (1) α can Agree with β iff:
- α carries at least one uninterpretable feature and β carries a matching interpretable feature
 - β c-commands α
 - β is the closest goal to α

The crucial innovation in (1) is a reversal in the direction of valuation: the element that contributes the value (e.g. in the case of predicate-argument agreement in φ -features, the nominal) is required to c-command the element that receives its value derivatively (e.g. the verb or tense/aspect/mood marker)—rather than the other way around, as standardly assumed.

In this short reply, I wish to demonstrate that (1) is untenable as a theory of agreement proper (i.e., as an account of the morpho-phonologically overt co-variance in φ -features between a finite verb or a tense/aspect/mood marker and a nominal argument).

In §2, I survey two empirical cases of φ -agreement that cannot be handled in terms of (1), one from Polinsky & Potsdam (2001) and one from my own work (Preminger 2009, 2011b).

In §3, I discuss the consequences of these facts.

2. Two case-studies in standard (i.e., upwards-valuation) φ -agreement

2.1. Tsez (Polinsky & Potsdam 2001)

Polinsky & Potsdam (2001) discuss a pattern of Long-Distance Agreement (LDA) with embedded topics in Tsez. Crucially, this pattern involves agreement between a given verb and an argument contained within a clause embedded by that verb:

- (2) a. eni-r [uži ø-āy-ru-li] ø-iy-xo (Tsez)
 mother-DAT boy.I.ABS I-arrive-PAST.PRT-NMZ I-know-PRES
 ‘The mother knows that as for the boy, he arrived.’
- b. eni-r [už-ā magalu b-āc’-ru-li] b-iy-xo
 mother-DAT boy-ERG bread.III.ABS III-eat-PAST.PRT-NMZ III-know-PRES
 ‘The mother knows that as for the bread, the boy ate it.’

[Polinsky & Potsdam 2001:606]

The noun-class morphology on the matrix predicates in (2a–b) is determined by the noun-class of the absolutive argument in the embedded clause (class-i in (2a), and class-III in (2b)).

The word-order in an example like (2b) already casts significant doubt on the idea that the absolutive “*magalu*” (‘bread.III.ABS’) has vacated the embedded clause and moved into a position c-commanding the matrix verb, which it would need to do to adhere to Zeijlstra’s (1); but

Polinsky & Potsdam provide additional arguments that the agreement target in a construction like (2a–b) is indeed within the embedded clause at every relevant level of representation.

First, they provide evidence against a “proleptic object” account, where there would be a null object in the matrix clause that is anaphorically linked to the embedded absolutive argument, and it is this matrix object that controls agreement in the matrix clause (under such an account, an example like (2b) would be translatable roughly as “*The mother knows (of the bread) that the boy ate it.*”). The evidence provided includes (i) the availability of LDA even in the presence of a coreferential matrix subject (3), even though Tsez lacks null reflexives; (ii) the impossibility of an overt proleptic object (4); (iii) the strict locality of LDA (which can go only “one clause up”; (5)), which is unexpected if the transmission mechanism is anaphoric binding; (iv) the unavailability of matrix scope for embedded absolutes in LDA constructions (6); and (v) the unavailability of matrix reflexives bound by the putative proleptic object (7).

(3) “REFLEXIVE” LDA

- a. [irbahin-er-no ^ʕali-r-no]₁ [žedā žedu₁ goχ'i-x-ānu-si-ħi]
 Ibrahim-DAT-and Ali-DAT-and each other.ABS.I.PL invite-PRES-NEG-PRSPRT-NMLZ]
 b-ix-yo
 I.PL-know-PRES
 ‘[Ibrahim and Ali]₁ know that they have not invited each other₁.’
- b. [irbahin-er-no pat'i-r-no]₁ [žedā žedu₁] / * [žedu₁] b-eti-x
 Ibrahim-DAT-and Fatima-DAT-and each other.ABS / * them.ABS I.PL-like-PRES
 ‘Ibrahim and Fatima like each other.’

(4) IMPOSSIBILITY OF OVERT PROLEPTIC OBJECT

- enir Ø/*magalu/*že [užā **magalu** bāc'ruħi] b-ix-yo
 mother Ø/*bread/*it boy **bread.III.ABS** ate III-know-PRES
 ‘The mother knows the boy ate the bread.’

(5) LOCALITY OF LDA (CONTRA ANAPHORIC BINDING)

- babir [enir [užā **magalu** bāc'ruħi] b-iyxosi-ħi] r/*b-iy-xo
 father mother boy **bread.III.ABS** ate III-know-NMLZ IV/*III-know-PRES
 ‘The father knows [the mother knows [the boy ate bread]].’

(6) LACK OF MATRIX SCOPE FOR EMBEDDED QUANTIFIERS IN LDA

- sis učiteler [šibaw uži Ø-ik'ixosi-ħi] r-iy-xo
 one teacher every boy-I.ABS I-go-NMLZ IV-know-PRES
 ‘Some teacher knows that every boy is going.’: ✓ ∃teacher > ∀boy, ✗ ∀boy > ∃teacher

(7) LACK OF MATRIX BINDING BY LDA TARGETS

- a. * enir [nesā.nesiz yutkā] [^ʕali Ø-āk'i-ru-ħi] Ø/r-iyysi
 mother his.REFL in.house Ali.I I-go-PSTPRT-NMLZ I/IV-knew
 Intended: ‘The mother found out in his₁ house that Ali₁ had already left.’
- b. babiy-ā [nesā.nesiz yutkā] ^ʕali žek'si
 father-ERG his.REFL in.house Ali.ABS hit
 ‘The father hit Ali₁ in his₁ house.’

[Polinsky & Potsdam 2001:616–620]

The last two facts (6–7) also militate against an account of Tsez LDA in terms of raising—i.e., movement of the LDA target from the embedded clause into the subordinating clause. Polinsky & Potsdam provide additional evidence to this effect, involving the ability of the entire embedded clause, including the LDA target, to move as a constituent:

- (8) a. enir b-iy-xo [užā **magalu** b-āc'ru-ŋi]
 mother **III**-knows-PRES boy **bread.III.ABS** ate
 'The mother knows the boy ate the bread.'
- b. [užā **magalu** b-āc'ru-ŋi] enir b-iy-xo
 boy **bread.III.ABS** ate mother **III**-knows-PRES
 'The mother knows the boy ate the bread.'

A consistent picture thus emerges, whereby LDA with embedded topics in Tsez is an instance of the upstairs verb agreeing with an argument that has remained within the embedded clause, thus constituting evidence against Zeijlstra’s (1).

2.2. “Substandard” Basque (Preminger 2009, 2011b)

As discussed extensively in Preminger 2009, 2011b, Basque examples like (9) (first discussed from a generative perspective by Etxepare 2006) constitute an instance of the upstairs auxiliary agreeing with the absolutive argument of an embedded predicate:

- (9) *AGREEMENT WITH EMBEDDED ABSOLUTIVE ARGUMENT*
 [[Miren-entzat]_{PP} [harri horiek]_(ABS) altxa-tze-n] probatu
 Miren-BEN stone(s) those_{pl}ABS lift-NMZ-LOC attempted
 [d-it-u-zte]_{aux}. (Basque)
 3.ABS-**pl**.ABS-√-3pl.ERG
 ‘They have attempted to lift those stones for Miren.’
 (subject is *pro* <3pl.ERG>) [Preminger 2009:641]

Several facts demonstrate that the controller of absolutive agreement in a construction like (9) has indeed remained within the embedded clause. First, note that the absolutive argument in question is ‘sandwiched’ between an unselected modifier (“*Miren-entzat*” ‘Miren-BEN’) and the embedded predicate (“*altxa-*” ‘lift-’), neither of which are expected to be movable out of the embedded clause on standard syntactic assumptions (the former because it is adverbial in nature, and the latter because it is a head rather than a phrase).

Second, replacing the benefactive PP with a dative nominal, as in (10), results in intervention—precluding plural absolutive agreement on the matrix auxiliary irrespective of the features of the downstairs absolutive argument or the dative intervener:

- (10) DATIVE INTERVENTION IN BASQUE LDA
 [[Lankide-e-i]_{DAT} [liburu horiek]_{ABS} irakur-tze-n] probatu
 colleague(s)-ART_{pl}-DAT book(s) those_{pl}(ABS) read-NMZ-LOC attempted
 [d-Ø/*it-u-(z)te]_{aux}.
 3.ABS-sg/*pl.ABS-√-3pl.ERG
 ‘They have attempted to read those books to the colleagues.’
 (subject is *pro* <3pl.ERG>) [Preminger 2009:641]

That agreement with the embedded absolutive argument is sensitive to changing the PP to a dative indicates that it has not moved across the position of the PP/dative, at whatever level of representation is relevant to φ -agreement. Therefore, such data militates even against an account of (10) in terms of covert movement of the downstairs absolutive, insofar as agreement is taken to rely on such covert movement to furnish its input (since such movement would bleed intervention by interveners contained in the embedded clause).

Thus, LDA in “substandard” Basque constitutes another instance of φ -agreement in which the nominal target could not have moved to a position c-commanding the agreeing head (in this case, the matrix auxiliary), thus providing further evidence against Zeijlstra’s (1).

3. Consequences

We have seen detailed evidence against Zeijlstra’s (2012) claim that the direction of agreement should be generally reversed, so that valuation would flow downwards (from a c-commanding bearer of values, to a c-commanded node seeking such values).

What are we to make of these results? It is certainly the case that a uniform theory along the lines of (1) is untenable, insofar as the terms “Agree” or “agreement” are to be understood as having anything to do with actual φ -agreement (i.e., morpho-phonologically overt co-variance in φ -features). In this respect, it is interesting to note that the majority of evidence put forth by Zeijlstra in favor of (1) comes not from φ -agreement proper, but from empirical domains such as sequence-of-tense, negative concord, and intermediate *wh*-movement. Even an empirical domain like the assignment of case, used by Zeijlstra to motivate the existence of *Multiple Agree*, is actually not a matter of agreement; contra the widely accepted assumptions of Chomsky (2000, 2001), case is in fact known to be quite distinct from φ -agreement proper (see, for example, Bobaljik 2008, Preminger 2011a).

Crucially, there is no pre-theoretic reason to believe necessarily that any and all instances of correspondence between two expressions or two syntactic positions, or any restrictions on the distribution of morphemes, are a matter of “agreement” proper. That might very well be the null hypothesis; but if the results put forth by Zeijlstra are indeed correct, then given the facts surveyed in §2.1–§2.2, this hypothesis can no longer be maintained. It would therefore be a good idea for theorizers working on the formal relation underpinning phenomena such as negative concord to find a new term for the formal mechanism they are researching, one that is distinct from “agreement”.

Another possibility is that the two empirical domains, agreement proper and the concord phenomena discussed by Zeijlstra, are an instance of the same phenomenon after all, and that the direction of valuation is intrinsically flexible, as recently proposed by Carstens (2012), for example.

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SVN revision code 2877.