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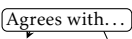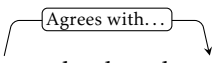## Tracking relationships between words - Case and Agreement

1.1 Showing syntactic relationships between words

There are a number of different ways to show syntactic relationships between words. These are demonstrated by the following examples which deliberately have jumbled word order. When you read them, try to figure out who is doing what to whom.

(1)   The teachers Mary likes

(2)   Chase the dog the cats

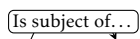(3)   Patrick she is laughing at

(4)   Hit him the bowler on the leg

In (1) and (2) the verb endings, like-s and chase_ help to identify the subject. This is because the verb ending tells us something about the subject. In English we have a special ending for 3rd person singular; like-s and this helps us to choose the subject which is singular in (1). In (2) we know that the third person singular noun *dog* cannot be the subject because we don't have the right verb ending. Therefore *cats* must be the subject. The verb has to **agree** with the subject, i.e. have the same person (1st, 2nd and 3rd) and number (singular and plural) properties. These properties are expressed by the **agreement morpheme** on the end of the verb.
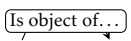
(5)
$$\text{The teachers } \underset{\text{Agrees with...}}{\text{Mary}_{3s} \text{ likes}_{3s}}$$

(6)
$$\underset{\text{Agrees with...}}{\text{Chase}_{3p} \text{ the dog the cats}_{3p}}$$

3s = 3rd person singular, 3p = 3rd person plural

    (3) and (4) employ **case-marked pronouns** *she* and *him* which help us to figure out who does what to whom. **Case** refers to the morphological marking of syntactic functions on Noun Phrases. In (3) and we can see that *she* is the subject because it has **nominative** case-marking (sometimes called **subjective case**), and in (4) we can see that *him* is the object because it has **accusative** case marking (sometimes called **objective case**);

(7)
$$\text{Patrick } \overset{\text{Is subject of...}}{\text{she}} \text{ is laughing at}$$

(8)
$$\text{Hit } \overset{\text{Is object of...}}{\text{him}} \text{ the bowler on the leg}$$

We can see from these examples that case and agreement help us to work out syntactic relationships between words, e.g. who does what to whom. In English case and agreement cues are not that important as there are very strong word order cues. For example, in the sentence

(9)   Me likes it

We have incorrect case-marking on *me*, and incorrect agreement marking on *likes*, but we have a strong preference to use word order to work out who does what to whom. This makes the sentence highly interpretable (in examples (1) - (4) the word order is highly unusual putting the verb either at the very beginning or end of the sentence, and therefore to interpret it, we need to pay more attention to case and agreement cues). In other languages, case and agreement are far more important for interpretation and we're going to see some examples.

1.2   Case-marking in English

The case system for English is not very rich. With the exception of the **Anglo-Saxon genitive** (Peter's book) case is only marked on pronouns;

Table 1.1: Case-marking on pronouns in English

	Nominative Used for subjects	Accusative Used with any post-verbal argument (Od, Oi, Co, Cs)	Possessive * (Range of syntactic positions)
1st pers. sing.	**I**, e.g. I am happy	**Me**, e.g. She hit me	**Mine**, e.g. That pen is mine
2nd pers. sing.	**You**, e.g. You are great	**You**, e.g. I'm going to sack you	**Yours**, e.g. That cup is yours
3rd pers. sing. male	**He**, e.g. He's a bit dull	**Him**, e.g. I really like him	**His**, e.g. That book is his
3rd pers. sing. female	**She**, e.g. She's very famous	**Her**, e.g. I don't understand her	**Hers**, That apple is hers
1st pers. plur.	**We**, e.g. We are having a good time	**Us**, e.g. Don't forget us!	**Ours**, e.g. That dog is ours
2nd pers. plur.	**You**, e.g. You are all bunch of losers!	**You**, e.g. (teacher to class) I told you to be quiet!	**Yours**, e.g. (businessman to clients) My time is yours
3rd pers. plur.	**They**, e.g. They are having a laugh	**Them**, e.g. I don't like them	**Theirs**, e.g. That shop is theirs

* Sometimes called **genitive**

First person pronouns refer to the **speaker**, **Second person** pronouns refer to the **listener** and **Third person** pronouns refer to someone or something who is **neither speaker nor listener**, i.e. someone or something outside the conversation.

We can see that this is a relatively rich system, with different forms for nominative and accusative case, with the exception of the 2nd person singular and plural (*You*). Forms also change in the plural, again with 2nd person again being the exception.

We can see that nominative case is used for subjects, while accusative case is used for post-verbal arguments (otherwise called postverbal complements). There are some other situations where we use accusative case;

1. Accusative case after prepositions

    (10)   She walked down the street with $\mathbf{him}_{ACC}$

2. Accusative case for stand-alone pronouns

    (11)   A: Jack won the singing competition
                  B: **Him**$_{\text{ACC}}$? I thought he was a terrible singer

    (12)   A: My mate's band has just got a recording contract
                  B: **Them**$_{\text{ACC}}$!? They're awful!

3. Accusative case as part of a conjoined subject

    A conjoined subject is a subject containing a coordinating conjunction;

    (13)   **Me**$_{\text{ACC}}$ or **him**$_{\text{ACC}}$ can fix the car

    (14)   **Her**$_{\text{ACC}}$ and Jane went to the cinema

    Note however, the nominative *I* can also be used after a coordinating conjunction, e.g.

    (15)   Jane and I went to the cinema

Finally, of course, we have the anglo-saxon genitive, e.g.

(16)   Can you give me Peter's book

This is the only case which can be applied to nouns as opposed to pronouns.

1.3   Case-marking across language

While case-marking on pronouns in English may look fairly complicated, it is relatively simple from a cross-linguistic perspective. Many languages mark case on nouns, and many languages have more cases than English. Latin has 6 cases. It has all of the English cases (Nominative, Accusative and Possessive / Genitive), and in addition, it has **dative case** for an indirect object;

(17)   nautae   donum dedi
            sailor$_{\text{DAT}}$ present give$_{\text{3ps.past}}$
            I gave the present to the sailor

vocative case for when we are addressing someone;

(18)   gratias   tibi   ago, nauta
            thank$_{\text{1ps.pres}}$ you$_{\text{ACC}}$ I$_{\text{NOM}}$, sailor$_{\text{VOC}}$
            Thank you sailor!

and the ablative case which is used in a variety of grammatical constructions, including comparatives;

(19)   sum   alterior nautā
            be$_{\text{1ps.pres}}$ taller   sailor$_{\text{ABL}}$
            I am taller than the sailor

We can see that where Latin uses a case-marking for the dative and ablative, English uses prepositions *to* and *than* (shaded in the glosses above). So often where one language will use case-marking another language will use a preposition. These two alternatives can be demonstrated by the possessive relationship in English which can be marked using both a case ending, e.g. *John's book*, and a preposition, e.g. *the book of John*.

    If you think the Latin system is complicated, then try learning Hungarian, which has 17 cases!

1.4 Agreement

Person and number agreement

If two words **agree**, they express the same grammatical property, sometimes using an inflectional morpheme. In English we mark the grammatical properties of **person**, and **number** on the verb. The verb agrees with the person and number properties of the **subject**. In the present tense, agreement is expressed using 3rd person plural -s. If there is no -s, then the number / agreement properties can be anything except 3rd person plural;

Table 1.2: Present tense verb endings in English and Spanish

	Singular	Plural
First person (refers to speaker)	**I talk** Yo hablo	**We talk** Nosotros hablamos
Second person (refers to conversational partner)	**You_{sing.} talk** Tu hablas	**You_{pl.} talk** Vosotros hablaís
Third person (refers to third party)	**He/she/it talk s** El / ella habla	**They talk** Ellos ellas hablan

By contrast, Spanish has a very rich agreement system

We can see that agreement in English is relatively redundant as the sentence is often intepretable without it. For example, this sentence;

(20)   *He like-s her

is ungrammatical but completely interpretable. By contrast in Spanish, the agreement properties of the verb really help interpret the sentence, e.g. in

(21)   Hablamos   pronto?
        Talk_{1pp.pres}   soon?
        Shall we talk soon?

the ending on the verb tells us that we are referring to the 1st person singular (we).

In the past tense, there is no person and number agreement in English, but many languages mark it. This is shown in Table (21).

Table 1.3: Past tense verb endings in English and Spanish

	Singular	Plural
First person (refers to speaker)	**I talked** Yo hablo	**We talked** Nosotros hablamos
Second person (refers to conversational partner)	**You_{sing.} talked** Tu hablaste	**You_{pl.} talked** Vosotros hablastaís
Third person (refers to third party)	**He/she/it talked** El / ella habló	**They talked** Ellos ellas hablaron

Person and number agreement can also be expressed on **reflexive pronouns**;

(22)   They_{3pp} like themselves_{3pp}

(23)   *They_{3pp} like himself_{3ps}

3pp = 3rd person plural, and 3ps = 3rd person singular

(24)   *I_{1ps} like yourself_{2ps}

1ps = 1st person singular, 2ps = 2nd person singular

Gender agreement

In English this can be marked on **reflexive pronouns**;

(25)   She_{fem} saw herself_{fem} in the mirror

(26)   *She_{fem} saw himself_{masc} in the mirror

fem = feminine, masc = masculine

and possessive determiners

(27)   She^i_{fem} dropped her^i_{fem} book

(28)   *She^i_{fem} dropped his^i_{masc} book

Gender plays a much more important role in other languages. For example, in Spanish, there must be gender agreement between adjectives and nouns;

(29)   Vi   muchos   bichos
       saw_{1ps.past} many_{masc.pl} insects_{masc.pl}
       I saw many insects

(30)   *Vi   muchas   bichos
       saw_{1ps.past} many_{fem.pl} insects_{masc.pl}
       I saw many insects

and between determiners and nouns;

(31)   Da   me las   manzanas
       Give me the_{fem.pl} apples_{fem.pl}
       Give me the apples

(32)   *Da   me los   manzanas
       Give me the_{masc.pl} apples_{fem.pl}
       Give me the apples

We can also see that there has to be **number** agreement between the determiner and noun. All of the above sentences have number agreement (plural markers are shown in green). Here is an example of ungrammatical sentence without number agreement;

(33)   *Da   me la_   manzanas
       Give_{INF} me the_{masc.sing} apples_{fem.pl}
       Give me the apples

Noun class agreement

There can also be agreement between nouns and other words. In English there must be agreement between nouns and the type of determiner. English nouns can be either **mass nouns**, referring to an undifferentiated mass, e.g. smoke, air, mud, or **count nouns**, referring to things which we can count, e.g. one apple, two telephones, three cars. Mass nouns cannot be counted, e.g. *one smoke*, *two airs*, *three muds*. The determiner must agree with the noun in terms of its count / mass property, e.g.

(34)   He has many$_{count}$ apples$_{count}$

(35)   *He has many$_{count}$ money$_{mass}$

(36)   He doesn't have much$_{mass}$ money$_{mass}$

(37)   *He doesn't have much$_{mass}$ apples$_{count}$

NB. When a determiner refers to quantity, it is called a **quantifier**

Some languages have a very rich system of noun classes. For example, Swahili classifies nouns according to whether they are people, things, fruit or animals, and other words in the sentence must agree with the noun, i.e. use the same prefix, e.g.

(38)   Kitabu   kikubwa kinaanguka
        Book$_{pl.thing}$ big$_{pl.thing}$ falls$_{pl.thing}$
        The book falls

1.5   The role of case and agreement

We saw at the beginning that case and agreement can be used to work out the meaning of the sentence at the level of who does what to whom. This can be demonstrated when we are obliged to interpret sentences with unusual word orders (examples (1) - (4)). However, when we have word order cues we tend to overlook incorrect case and agreement (example (20)). So it is debatable whether case and agreement play an important role in interpreting sentences in English. In a way it could be argued that from a communicative perspective, case and agreement in English are redundant.

However, in other languages, case and agreement, play an extremely important role in interpreting sentences. Latin has a very flexible order. For example, we could say, *donum nautae dedi*, *donum dedi dautae*, *nautae donum dedi*, *nautae dedi donum*, *donum nautae dedi*, or *donum dedi nautae*. So case is obviously vital for working out relationships between words.

In historical terms, English used to be more similar to latin with stronger case and agreement morphology which played an important function in communication. Now, the agreement and case morphology is "vestigial" in the sense that it plays little to no role in interpretation (except in the rather unusual case where we jumble up sentences!). Spanish and German are somewhere in the middle. Spanish has complex agreement morphology while German has complex case-marking. Speakers of Spanish and German often use this morphology during interpretation, yet their role is weaker than in latin, and word order also plays an important role, just like in English.

On a theoretical level the fact that case and agreement often play no obvious communicative role is quite interesting as it shows that not all aspects of language have a communicative function.

Links to therapy

Children with SLI have difficulties with both case and agreement. For example they say

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instead of *She does that*. Here we have a case-marking error on *her* and an agreement error on *do*. A number of theories have been proposed to explain this. Some have argued that they have a basic difficulty with innate grammatical case and agreement mechanisms (Wexler, K., Schütze, C. T., & Rice, M. (1998). Subject case in children with SLI and unaffected controls Evidence for the Agr/Tns omission model. Language Acquisition, 7(2-4), 317-344). A slightly different account suggests that children with SLI are indiscriminately using chunks from the input, e.g. INPUT make her do it ⇒ OUTPUT her do it (Kirjavainen, M., Theakston, A., & Lieven, E. (2009). Can input explain children's me-for-I errors? Journal of Child Language, 36(05), 1091).

Food for thought

Brian MacWhinney's Competition Model attempts to explain how people use information from a number of different sources, e.g. word order, case and agreement, in order to resolve who does what to whom (Click Here. for an introduction to this model)

Useful Terms

agree (verb), agreement morpheme, case, case-marked (adj.), case-marking, nominative (subjective) case, accusative (objective) case, possessive (genitive) case, dative case, Anglo-saxon genitive, person agreement, number agreement, gender agreement, reflexive pronoun, mass noun, count noun

Further Reading

Borjars & Burridge 167, Crystal section 34.

Homework

1. Correct these sentences and explain why they are incorrect

    a) Janet likes she

    > *Janet likes **her**.* Accusative case in Od position

    b) Paul gave the books to they

    > *Paul gave the books to **them**.* Accusative case after a preposition

    c) Her is really happy

    > *She is really **happy**.* Nominative case in subject position.

d) We is on top of the situation

> *We **are** on top of the situation.* Need for subject-verb agreement (1st person plural)

e) He are a really good friend

> *He **is** a really good friend.* Need for subject-verb agreement (3rd person singular)

f) Jane and she really like eating pasta

> *Jane and **her** really like eating pasta.* Accusative case in a conjoined subject

g) That's he walking down the street

> *That's **him** walking down the street.* Accusative case in Od position. *Him* is Od of verb *to be.*

2. What is unusual about the sentence? *I'm really good at this, aren't I?*

> There is a breakdown of subject-verb agreemeint in the "tag question" (*aren't I?*). The first person singular copula is *am*, e.g. *I am happy* . This unusual non-agreeing form of the copula only occurs in negative tag questions (*aren't I?*), and negative questions, e.g. *Aren't I the greatest*? However some dialects use an agreeing form, e.g. Irish English uses 'amn't I?'