

From competing theories to fieldwork (ARCHI)

Introductory seminar

Basic agreement terms¹

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1. Agreement: information in the “wrong place”

(1) Mary makes pancakes.

2. Agreement in a grammar

syntax

(2) The cooks make pancakes.

semantics

(3) The committee has agreed.

(4) The committee have agreed.

But not just semantics (Morgan 1984: 235):

(5) More than one person has failed this exam.

(6) Fewer than two people have failed this exam.

And, more generally, the issue of grammatical gender:

Russian

(7) lamp-a stoja-l-a v ugl-u
lamp(F)-SG stand-PST-F.SG in corner-SG.LOC
‘the lamp was standing in the corner’

morphology:

(8) Mary made pancakes.

(9) The cooks made pancakes.

lexis:

(10) The cooks were early.

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pragmatics:

Russian (19th century, from Turgenev's *Nakanune* 'On the Eve', 1860)

- (11) «Mamen´ka **plač-ut** [...] a papen´ka **gnevaj-ut-sja ...**»
 Mother cry-3PL and father be.angry-3PL-REFL
 “Your mother is crying” [...] “and your father is angry ...”

3. Defining terms

The term *agreement* commonly refers to some systematic covariation between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another. Steele (1978: 610)

Further terms (Corbett 2006: 4-5)

We call the element which 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 (the clause for instance) is the **domain** of agreement. And when we indicate in what respect there is agreement, we are referring to agreement **features**. Thus number is an agreement feature, it has the values: singular, dual, plural and so on. This is diagrammed in Figure 1.1.

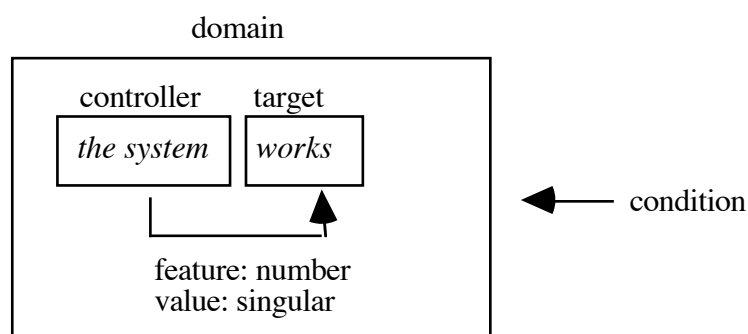


Figure 1.1: Framework of terms

Features are directly reflected in agreement. There can be other factors (like word order) which have an effect on agreement but are not directly reflected like features. Such factors are called agreement **conditions**. Thus within a particular domain, a target agrees with a controller in respect of their feature specifications (that is, the features and their values); this may be dependent on some other condition being met.

Alternatives:

- controller aka ‘trigger’ or ‘source’ (roughly ‘goal’)
- target (roughly ‘probe’)
- feature aka ‘category’
- condition aka ‘conditioning factor’

Notes:

controller and **target** imply an asymmetry. There are two main motivations:

1. information in the right place (on the controller) and in the wrong place (on the target). Recall *Mary makes pancakes* (one Mary, potentially many events).

Connected to this is the point that **NUMBER** has a semantic effect on the controller and not on the target.

2. the target typically has all the possible feature values, while the controller may be restricted (as in agreement in gender, or agreement with pluralia tantum). However, this asymmetry is not necessarily modeled directly; unification is symmetrical.

features (e.g. **NUMBER** and **values** (e.g. **DUAL**): worth being clear to avoid confusion

domain: there is disagreement as to whether antecedent-to-anaphoric-pronoun constitutes an agreement domain. (The answer is normally ‘yes’ in HPSG and LFG, ‘no’ in Minimalism.)

agreement vs ‘concord’; these are still occasionally separated in confusing and contradictory ways; I suggest just using ‘agreement’.

Interpretations are affected substantially by one’s view of morphology.

4. Agreement and government

This is a traditional distinction, whose status varies in different theories of syntax, since both sets of phenomena can be treated as feature satisfaction. In the clearest instances of agreement (those we might treat as ‘canonical’), agreement can be distinguished from government rather readily. Consider this example taken from a corpus of spoken Russian.

Russian conversation (Zemskaja & Kapanadze 1978: 251)

- (12) Zna-eš' kak-oj mne vseгда dava-l-a
 know-2SG what-M.SG.ACC 1SG.DAT always give-PST-F.SG
 sovet moj-a mam-a ?
 advice(M)[SG.ACC] my-F.SG.NOM mother(FEM)-SG
 ‘Do you know what advice my mother always gave me?’

(13) Summary of differences: canonical agreement and canonical government

	AGREEMENT	GOVERNMENT
1. feature specification of target/governee is determined by:	feature specification of controller	presence of governor
2. controller/governor:	has the relevant feature specification	does not have the relevant feature specification
3. element which is normally nominal:	controller	governee
4. features involved are:	gender, number, person	case
5. multiple targets/governees are:	same as each other	different from each other

5. Canonical agreement

There are conceptual problems and misunderstandings that have characterized the topic of agreement. To deal with these one idea is to adopt a ‘canonical’ approach. This means that we shall take definitions to their logical end point and build a theoretical space of possibilities. Only then do we ask how this space is populated. It follows that canonical instances, which are the best and clearest examples, those most closely matching the ‘canon’, may well not be the most frequent. They may indeed be extremely rare. However, they fix a point from which occurring phenomena can be calibrated. Then we discuss weakenings of the criteria, which allow for less canonical instances. As these instances no longer fully match the definitions, they will include some which not all linguists would accept as instances of agreement.

As a preview, consider agreement in gender in the Italian noun phrase:

Italian (Pierluigi Cuzzolin, personal communication)

(14) il nuov-o quadr-o
 DEF.M.SG new-M.SG picture(M)-SG
 ‘the new picture’

(15) i nuov-i quadr-i
 DEF.M.PL new-M.PL picture(M)-PL
 ‘the new pictures’

- (16) la nuov-a tel-a
 DEF.F.SG new-F.SG painting(F)-SG
 ‘the new painting’
- (17) le nuov-e tel-e
 DEF.F.PL new-F.PL painting(F)-PL
 ‘the new paintings’

In summary, the canonical aspects of these examples are as follows:

- controller: is present, has overt expression of features, and is consistent in the agreements it takes, its part of speech is not relevant (this is a vacuous criterion in (14)-(17))
- target: has bound expression of agreement, obligatory marking, doubling the marking of the noun, marking is regular, alliterative, productive; the target has a single controller and its part of speech is not relevant
- domain: agreement is asymmetric (the gender of the adjective depends on that of the noun), local, and the domain is one of multiple domains
- features: lexical (in one instance), matching values, not offering any choice in values
- conditions: no conditions

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