

Morphological ϕ -agreement in English: Singular *they* and relative *who*

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Considered in its entirety, the past-tense paradigm of English *be* poses a challenge for late-insertion theories of morphology (such as Distributed Morphology, Halle & Marantz 1993). Treatments of this paradigm often ignore 'singular *they*,' even though this pronoun has a long history as a bound variable and a robust, if more recent, pattern of use as a pronoun of reference for individual people whose gender is non-binary, irrelevant, or unknown (Konnelly & Cowper 2017; Bjorkman 2017).

The paradigm at issue is shown at right. If the 3SG non-gendered form (**they**) *were* did not exist, it might be possible to characterize *was* as spelling out agreement with a singular non-second-person subject, and *were* as the default form. But the existence of this form means there is no set of features shared by all and only the *was* cells in the table, nor is there a set of features shared by all and only the *were* cells.

			SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st			(I) <i>was</i>	(we) <i>were</i>
2nd			(you) <i>were</i>	(you) <i>were</i>
3rd	INAN.		(it) <i>was</i>	} (they) <i>were</i>
3rd	ANIM.		(they) <i>were</i>	
3rd	ANIM.	FEM.	(she) <i>was</i>	
3rd	ANIM.	MASC.	(he) <i>was</i>	

I contend that it is no accident that *were* appears in the singular exactly where there are syncretisms in the pronoun paradigm: the 'plural' form of the verb agrees with morphologically 'plural' pronouns, even when they spell out singular subjects. Building on Bobaljik's (2006) proposal that ϕ -agreement is morphological rather than syntactic, I propose that the realization of the verb is sensitive to the vocabulary item spelling out the subject, rather than to the full set of features constituting the subject in the syntax. Insertion of the subject pronoun precedes morphological copying of features from the subject to the verb, and only features that have been realized by the pronoun are copied. If the pronoun spells out number (sg. *I, it, she, he* or pl. *we*), number will be copied to the verb; if the pronoun is unmarked for number (*you, they*), it will not. After copying, a verbal VI is chosen. *Was* is marked as singular; *were* is the default, and will be used if the subject is plural (*we*) or syncretic (*you, they*).

This pattern seems surprising in a language that (in some varieties) allows semantic plural agreement with superficially singular subject nominals (den Dikken's (2001) 'plurilinguals'). Here again, though, overt morphological expression of number in the subject constrains the agreement possibilities on the verb: the numeral *one* degrades semantic plural agreement ([?]*One committee have not yet met*; Huddleston & Pullum 2002), and semantic singular agreement is impossible if the noun is plural (**The jurors has reached a verdict*; cf. *The jury {has, have} reached a verdict*). The verb consistently exhibits formal morphological agreement with pronominal subjects and with full DPs containing overt number marking; with other DPs, it is free to express semantic number.

This pattern suggests a new argument for a promotion or raising analysis of relative clauses (Kayne 1994; Bianchi 1999; de Vries 2002), in which the head NP originates inside the relative clause. The evidence comes from a difference between relative and interrogative *who*. Agreement with interrogative *who* is singular even when a plural answer is pragmatically likely, as in (1); this is consistent with the proposal that the verb morphologically agrees with the number spelled out on the pronoun. But relative *who* shows semantic agreement, as in (2). The difference is explained if the subject of the relative clauses in (2) is not the pronoun *who*, but a full DP containing the head noun. The verb agrees with that subject as with other full DPs, showing singular agreement with singular non-collective nouns (2a), plural agreement with plural-marked nouns (2b), and semantic agreement with plurilinguals (2c).

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| <p>(1) a. <i>Who was besieging the castle?</i>
 b. <i>*Who were besieging the castle?</i></p> | <p>(2) a. <i>the person who was singing</i>
 b. <i>the people who were singing</i>
 c. <i>the group who {was, were} singing</i></p> |
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