Number matching in small clauses: Can we agree on Concord?

Susana Bejar, Arsalan Kahnemuyipour, Jessica Mathie and Tomohiro Yokoyama

This talk examines phi-feature matching patterns and restrictions in small clauses with two NPs. The restrictions shift under conditions that correlate with interpretive contrasts. We argue that two feature valuation processes, namely Agree and Concord, must be modeled distinctly. Let us begin with familiar contexts like the copular sentences in (1) where we see a number matching requirement between the subject and predicate NPs. (We assume a raising structure for the copula as in (3)). These matching patterns obtain independently of the agreement on the copula, as shown by (2), where the bracketed part has neither a copula nor (under standard assumptions) any inflectional structure (no T, etc).

(1) a. Mary is *violinists/a violinist in two orchestras
   b. Mary and Jane are violinists/*a violinist in two orchestras
(2) a. They consider [Mary *virtuosos/a virtuoso] (3) BE [NP1 … NP2]
   b. They consider [Mary and Jane virtuosos/*a virtuoso]

In contrast, no such matching is required in (4)-(5) (the context here is a platter of fruit that has been arranged to look like a face). Meanwhile, the absence of a matching requirement in (4)-(5) is not simply a matter of the second NP being a definite description; we see matching with definitive descriptions in (6).

(4) a. The nose is the kiwi/kiwis
   b. The banana is the eyebrow/eyebrows.
   c. The nostrils are the grape/grapes
   d. The berries are the eye/eyes
(5) The kids made [the banana the eyebrow/eyebrows]

It is traditionally observed that in (1)/(2) NP2 is construed as a predicate (and the clause is said to be predicational), whereas in (4)/(5) NP2 is referential (and the clause equative). Sentences like (6) pattern as predicational under standard tests. Thus, it might seem that we are dealing with a straightforward surface generalization: number matching is required in predicational (but not equative) contexts. However, we argue that this correlation between copular clause type and matching is inaccurate. There are counter-examples cross-linguistically (see Bondaruk 2013 for Polish) and in English we see predicational sentences like (7) where matching is degraded. More significantly for our purposes, Percus & Sharvit (2014) give compelling semantic evidence to show that contrary to common assumptions, equative clauses are not reversible. These seriously undermine the traditional division between predicational and equative clauses (cf. Adger & Ramchand 2003, Moro 1997).

(7) The proposals are a problem/??problems

Returning to the feature matching problem, the puzzle is now more precise. Under the approach outlined above, the semantic status of NP2 is comparable in both predicational (1)-(2) and equative contexts (4)-(5), and we argue that the functional structure is comparable as well. Thus, we cannot correlate the presence/absence of the matching pattern to a copular clause type per se. Instead we will correlate it to the feature structure of NP2. We argue that obligatory feature matching is the outcome of a feature valuation process distinct from Agree in that it occurs automatically when a syntactic object with unvalued [_F] merges with one that has valued [F]. We call this Concord. For present purposes we assume NP1 always bears [#]. NP2 however may or may not bear [#]. If NP2 has reduced functional structure, e.g PhiP or NumP (cf. Wintschko & Dechaine 2002, Cardinaletti & Starke 1999), then it will have unvalued [,_], and matching will occur under Concord, as in (1)-(2). Similarly, if NP2 has defective (non-phrasal) D, as in (6), it will not bear [#] but [,_] and will trigger concord. Meanwhile, in some languages (e.g. Persian), canonical predicates have such reduced functional structure (e.g. bare NP) that no number feature is introduced at all, and so there is no Concord/matching and predicate NPs appear as singular. Another way we arrive at the same effect is if NP2 has extra structure (e.g. concealed CP layer) such that its [,_] feature is not accessible, as in nouns like problem in (7). Finally, matching will be obviated if NP2 has valued [#] as in the case of the type shifted individual concepts, as in (4)-(5).

In short, by investigating and accounting for a range of matching patterns in small clauses, this paper furthers our understanding of Concord as a process distinct from Agree.
References


