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Agreement

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Definition: Agreement is a relationship of matching or systematic covariation of the features of constituents of a syntactic construct. All major syntactic categories and many minor categories can entertain agreement relationships of a variety of different kinds, typically involving subject–verb or modifier–head configurations.

Agreement

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Agreement: General properties

Agreement (or concord) is a relationship of matching or systematic covariation of the features of constituents of a syntactic construct — the constituents are said to agree in features: ϕ -features (where ‘ ϕ ’ is a cover for person, number, gender), case (Latin *illarum duarum bonarum feminarum* ‘of those two good women’, with genitive feminine plural marked throughout), noun class (Bantu), or some other properties (e.g. categorial features, as in Chamorro complementizer agreement; or tense).

All major syntactic categories can entertain agreement relationships with other constituents. In many languages, finite verbs agree with their subjects ('subject agreement'), and there are also languages in which finite verbs can agree with one or more of their objects ('object agreement'), or with *wh*-extracted constituents ('*wh*-agreement'; Bantu, Palauan, Chamorro); non-finite verbs can also show agreement with their dependents (past participle agreement in Romance languages; inflected infinitives in Portuguese, Hungarian). Predicative adjectives can agree with their subjects, attributive adjectives with the head noun. Predicate nominals often agree with their subjects as well; and possessed nouns may show agreement with their possessors. Finally, prepositions can agree with their objects (Celtic, Hungarian, Abkhaz).

Minor (or closed-class) syntactic categories may also show agreement. Determiners (articles, demonstratives) typically agree with the head noun of a complex noun phrase. Complementizers (subordinating conjunctions) may bear agreement inflection for either the subject of the clause they introduce (as in varieties of the Germanic languages) or a *wh*-phrase extracted out of that clause (as in Irish; cf. also relative clause constructions featuring inflected relative complementizers).

Head agreement and dependent agreement

An important typological distinction between languages is that between head-marking and dependent-marking languages (Nichols, 1986). Head-marking languages are rich agreement languages; dependent-marking ones express relationships between heads and their dependents in other ways (typically with case-marking on the dependent). Abkhaz, a typical head-marking language, shows agreement inflection on the verb for several of its arguments, and possessive inflection on nouns and prepositions. Languages may combine a rich head-marking agreement system with a system of morphological case-marking on dependents (Hungarian); languages showing neither type of marking also exist (Chinese).

Agreement can be classified along head/dependent lines as well. We define head agreement as involving agreement marking realized on the head, not on the dependent. Interpretively, in a sentence with an overt subject and an inflected verb, the expression of ϕ -features on the subject is meaningful (the difference between singular and plural noun phrases is semantically significant) while that on the finite verb is not (it is merely the reflection of the agreement relationship with the subject). Thus, we may call the ϕ -features on the subject interpretable and those on the verb uninterpretable (cf. Chomsky, 1995 for a theory in which this distinction plays a major role). In languages in which nominal arguments may remain unexpressed in the presence of ϕ -feature inflection on the head (so-called *pro*-drop languages), the inflection on the head may itself be taken to be meaningful — the inflection would *be* the argument of the head ('pronominal argument languages'; Jelinek, 1984). The pronominal agreement approach bears a strong relationship to analyses of *clitic* constructions; indeed, the dividing line between clitics and agreement is often difficult to draw and remains a contentious issue.

Agreement may also be marked on the dependent. The quintessential example of dependent agreement is the inflection of attributive adjectival modifiers of noun phrases, where the head noun determines the form of the modifying adjective. Another possible case of dependent agreement is that between anaphoric expressions and their antecedents (*They like themselves*); agreement here is not always strictly grammatical agreement, though (*Everybody thinks they are smart*). Both these dependent agreement cases can be reanalysed as involving head agreement (Abney, 1986; Kayne, 2001); whether the theory needs to recognize two separate agreement types is not immediately obvious, therefore.

In addition to the above agreement patterns, in which one member is the dependent of the other member of the pair, we find agreement relationships between items where neither is a direct dependent of the other. We will encounter some of these in the next section; they may be assimilable to the head/dependent pattern in ways sketched in the last section.

Intricacies of agreement

Agreement in ϕ -features exhibits a complicated distribution when it comes to the subset of features picked out. Number shows up cross-linguistically in all types of head agreement; person is frequently marked in finite verb agreement but not all languages having past participle or adjective agreement express person there (cf. Romance); gender, on the other hand, is much less commonly marked in finite verb agreement than in adjective agreement. Animacy and definiteness are two other major agreement features.

The question of whether we find agreement or not may be influenced by complicated syntactic factors, especially in the context of *subject* agreement and *extraction*. The position of a noun phrase *vis-à-vis* the agreeing verb may affect agreement possibilities: thus, in Arabic, prenominal subjects agree in all relevant features while postnominal subjects trigger person agreement only. In Berber and varieties of Celtic, *wh-extracted* subjects fail to agree with the verb *except* if the clause is negated, in which case subject agreement does show up (Ouhalla, 1993). And regular subject agreement can be suspended in sentences in which the finite verb agrees with a *wh*-constituent — as in Bantu (Kinyalolo, 1991) and varieties of American English (Kimball and Aissen, 1971: *the people who John think are in the garden*) — or with a subconstituent of the subject (‘agreement attraction’: *The identity of the participants are to remain a secret*).

Such ‘overruling’ tends to be skewed with respect to number: plurals can supplant regular singular agreement but the opposite is much less common (cf. the frequently occurring *the key to the doors are missing* vs. the much rarer *the keys to the door is missing*). This points towards number involving a *privative* opposition, with plural as the marked member. ‘Overruling’ of regular subject agreement also tends not to occur when the subject is pronominal. There is a robust cross-linguistic tendency for agreement between a head and a pronoun to be richer and more ‘persistent’ than that between a head and a full noun phrase. Thus, in Welsh VSO sentences the verb does not show number agreement with full-nominal subjects but subject pronouns must agree for number; *mutatis mutandis*, the same is found in Hungarian possessed noun phrases.

Within the realm of pronouns, first and second person pronouns often behave differently when it comes to agreement-related phenomena than do third person noun phrases (whether full-nominal or pronominal). Hungarian definiteness agreement between finite verbs and their objects yields straightforward results with third person objects, but first and second person object pronouns surprisingly trigger indefinite agreement on the verb. Splits between first and second person on the one hand, and third person on the other characterize many so-called ‘split ergative languages’ as well. The Mayan language Mocho, for instance, exhibits such a split. Other Mayan languages show split ergativity conditioned by tense, aspect or clause type (main *vs* subordinate; Dixon, 1994:201 and sections 4.3–4.4). Many morphologically ergative languages (e.g. Warlpiri) exhibit a nominative–accusative verb agreement pattern in tandem with an ergative–absolutive case system, showing that case and agreement patterns need not coincide.

Hybrid agreement patterns manifest themselves in a variety of forms. In French *Vous êtes loyal* ‘you-2PL are-2PL loyal-M.SG’, the second person plural pronoun *vous* is used as a polite form with a singular referent, in which case it triggers second person plural agreement on the verb but singular agreement on the predicate; similarly, in Spanish *Su Majestad suprema está contento* ‘your supreme-F.SG Majesty-F.SG is happy-M.SG’, *Majestad* triggers feminine agreement on the attributive adjective regardless of the referent, but has predicate agreement determined by the gender of the referent (here, masculine).

These kinds of hybrid agreement may also be classified as *semantic* agreement, with the ϕ -feature composition of the head being determined by the referent of the dependent rather than by the morpho-syntactic features of the dependent *per se*. Semantic agreement seems to be confined to head agreement.

Agreement in current grammatical theories

Semantic agreement is the cornerstone of Dowty and Jacobson's (1988) theory of agreement, in which agreement relationships are given a semantic explanation. In Reed's (1991) functional approach to verb number in English, semantics is also the epicentre: for Reed, what is generally referred to as an agreement relationship between the subject and the finite verb is not a case of agreement at all; instead, the number specification of each is chosen independently of that of the other, with each contributing independently to the message the speaker seeks to convey. Naturally, the emphasis in this work is on *lack* of agreement.

A semantic theory of agreement faces difficulties wherever semantic factors fail to have the final say. Thus, while *the dog* can be pronominalized with either *it* or *he*, in a sentence like *That dog is so ferocious, it/he even tried to bite itself/himself*, the assignment of gender to the subject pronoun and the object anaphor has to be uniform: the combinations *it+himself* and *he+itself* are impossible. This uniformity is not semantically determined; instead, it cues the need for a morpho-syntactic theory of agreement.

Pollard and Sag (1994), who contributed this argument against semantic approaches, offer a theory of agreement built on the feature-based formalism of Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar but allowing agreement access to semantic and pragmatic information as well. In this theory, ϕ -features are taken to be part of the internal structure of referential indices, the latter being the key notion of their theory. Indices in this theory make both a semantic and a syntactic contribution; they are vital in the analysis of agreement phenomena and referential dependencies.

A unified approach to agreement and referential dependencies in terms of indices is found also in the early principles-and-parameters literature (Chomsky, 1981, 1986; Borer 1986). In more recent principles-and-parameters work (Chomsky 1995), however, indices are assumed not to play a theoretical role. Instead, agreement is represented in terms of a local structural configuration ('specifier-head agreement'), or is established under a (potentially long-distance) Agree relationship (Chomsky, 2001). Of these two options,

the former represents theories on which agreement is a combination of feature matching and a specific structural configuration under which such matching is ‘checked’ — the Spec–Head structure (see the next section for more discussion), or Chomsky’s (1995) ‘checking domain’ (see Chung, 1998 for a different approach, cast in terms of the Associate relationship). The more recent Agree approach reduces agreement strictly to feature matching, with specific structural configurations resulting not from the need to establish agreement but from other, unrelated requirements.

Agreement as feature checking is essentially a *symmetrical* relationship; the Agree approach, by contrast, conceives of agreement as an *asymmetrical* relationship between a ‘probe’ and a ‘goal’. Early generative approaches to agreement were asymmetrical as well, with transformations *copying* ϕ -feature specifications from one member of the agreeing pair to the other. Asymmetrical agreement also characterizes Keenan’s (1979) approach to agreement in terms of the function–argument relationship. In the framework of Generalized Phrase-Structure Grammar (Gazdar *et al.*, 1985), agreement relations are likewise encoded asymmetrically, but in the more recent Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (Pollard and Sag, 1994), agreement is treated in symmetrical terms.

Agreement as evidence for structure

Agreement relationships are severely restricted: though there may be a variety of noun phrases present in the domain of a head, this head establishes agreement with only a narrow subset of those noun phrases. Thus, in *John ate Bill’s cereal this morning*, there are four noun phrases surrounding the verb but in no language will the verb agree with all four at the same time; at most, the verb agrees with the subject and the object. While the possessor can agree with the verb under special circumstances (‘possessor ascension to direct object’), bare NP adverbs never agree.

There are structural reasons why agreement relationships are so restricted. Agreement can be established in specific structural configurations only, of which the subject or specifier relationship seems to be the canonical case. If *all* agreement relationships are taken to involve such a structure, the occurrence of agreement between any two constituents is evidence for a structure in which these constituents are in a specifier–head relationship. In the principles-and-parameters theory of generative grammar, this hypothesis has led to the introduction of agreement phrases (AgrPs) for objects of verbs and prepositions and in the complementizer system. Agreement thus plays a pivotal role in the establishment of syntactic structures in some theories.

Agreement between complementizers and *wh*-extracted constituents and between possessors and possessed nouns is readily recast in these structural terms. When the possessed object itself incorporates into the verb, the possessor in a sense becomes a derived specifier of the verb; similarly, when the finite verb is incorporated into the complementizer position, the subject becomes a derived specifier of the complementizer (Zwart, 1997). In this way ‘possessor ascension’ and complementizer-subject agreement may be captured. Kayne (1995) shows that a similar treatment is available for cases of agreement in which the finite verb of an embedded clause agrees not with the subject but with an extracted non-subject (*the people who John think are in the garden*). More ‘exotic’ cases of agreement (like that between a subconstituent of a complex subject noun phrase and the finite verb in English ‘agreement attraction’ constructions like *The identity of the participants are to remain a secret*) may, when assimilated to specifier-head agreement, provide evidence for syntactic constituency or derivation as well (cf. Kayne, 1998; Den Dikken, 2000).

Often harder to recast as a specifier-head relationship, long-distance agreement between the matrix verb and an argument of the clause it embeds (as found in Daghestanian, Indic and Finno-Ugric languages) is restricted in ways which likewise provide highly specific evidence for syntactic structure (see e.g. Polinsky and Potsdam, 2001). Throughout, agreement is a key diagnostic in the syntactician’s toolkit.

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Glossary

Agreement	Relationship of matching or systematic covariation of the features of constituents of a syntactic construct (also known as <i>concord</i>)
Agreement attraction	Situation in which agreement is controlled by a subconstituent of the phrase which the agreeing head would regularly agree with
Clitic	Dependent elements (often pronouns) which depend on a host
Dependent agreement	Agreement marking on the dependent in a head–dependent configuration
Head agreement	Agreement marking on the head in a head–dependent configuration
Hybrid agreement	Situation in which one and the same constituent triggers full ϕ -feature agreement on some agreeing constituent(s) and only partial ϕ -feature agreement on others
ϕ -features	features for person, number, gender
Possessor ascension	Situation in which the possessor of an object noun phrase ‘ascends’ to direct object, triggering agreement on the verb and/or receiving structural case from it
Semantic agreement	Situation in which the ϕ -feature composition of the agreeing head is determined by the referent of the dependent rather than by the latter’s morphosyntactic features
Specifier–head relation	Configurational relationship in syntactic structure between a specifier and a head