

The Predicate Hierarchy from a derivational perspective

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When an agreement controller contains conflicting semantic and formal features, the predicates that agree with it can differ in which of the features they reflect. Different types of predicates crosslinguistically have been shown to align according to the following hierarchy:

(1) *The Predicate Hierarchy:*

finite verb > participle > adjective > noun

‘For any controller that permits alternative agreements, as we move rightwards along the Predicate Hierarchy, the likelihood of agreement with greater semantic justification will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease).’

(Corbett 1983:43p., Corbett 2006:231)

The hybrid controller that these observations were first based on was the pronoun for polite address, or the honorific pronoun (Comrie 1975). In languages such as Slavic, some from the Romance family (French, Italian, Romanian), as well as Modern Greek, the second person plural pronoun is used when politely addressing a single person. Finite verbs (the leftmost on the hierarchy) in these languages always show plural agreement, i.e. they agree with the *grammatical* features of the second person *plural* pronoun. However, other predicates, such as participles and adjectives, can show either plural agreement, consistent with the finite verbs and auxiliaries, or they can show an interesting behaviour – *singular* agreement and agreement in the *natural gender* of the referent, which constitutes an instance of purely *semantic* agreement (since the gender and singular number are not encoded in the morphology of the pronoun). The predicate noun, as the rightmost element, always agrees in semantic singular features of the pronoun.

(2) finite verb > participle > adjective > noun
[#:pl] > [#:pl]/[#:sg] > [#:pl]/[#:sg] > [#:sg]

In this talk, we will review the evidence for the existence of the hierarchy effects based on data from number agreement (mostly in Slavic). I will argue that the honorific pronoun formally encodes both the grammatical features (plural number and person) and the natural features (gender and singular number). Predicates differ with respect to the ϕ -features they probe for, and the order in which this probing applies. In particular, finite verbs will be shown to agree in number and person, in that order; participles and adjectives perform number and gender agreement and variation among and within languages emerges from the order of these operations (strict or underspecified); predicate nouns do not agree, as they have their own ϕ -feature set.

References

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