UNAGREEMENT IS AN ILLUSION: NOMINAL STRUCTURE AND APPARENT AGREEMENT MISMATCHES

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The term unagreement describes a phenomenon observable in various languages (Spanish, Catalan, Modern Greek, Bulgarian, Basque), involving an apparent agreement mismatch between a third person plural subject DP and first or second person plural subject agreement on the verb, cf. (1).

(1) Ftiaksame i fitites ena oreo keik.
made.1PL the students a good cake
'We students baked a good cake.' [Greek]

Languages with unagreement seem to be a proper subset of null subject languages, i.e. there are languages like Italian with null subjects, but without unagreement (2).

(2) Noi/*gli studenti habbiamo fatto una torta.
we/the students have.1PL made a cake
'We students baked a cake.' [Italian]

Theoretical accounts of the problem have mostly focused on Spanish without accounting for the cross-linguistic variation. They fall into three groups (terms borrowed from Ackema & Neeleman in prep.). "Hidden subject" analyses take the actual subject of unagreement sentences to be a silent pronoun related to the overt DP by, e.g., an A-Bar chain (Torrego 1996, 1998) or apposition (Bosque & Moreno 1984). "Hidden feature" analyses view the overt DP as the subject and suggest that it actually carries the person features giving rise to the visible verbal agreement. Symmetric agreement accounts (Ackema & Neeleman in prep.) assume that phi-features are generated independently on the subject DP and the verb and merely need to be compatible. The underspecified nature of third person allows it to be superseeded by first or second person features.

I observe a cross-linguistic correlation between the availability of unagreement and the form of *we students*-type expressions. On that basis, I argue for a form of the "hidden feature" approach set within the Distributed Morphology framework (e.g. Halle & Marantz 1993, Embick 2010). I propose that unagreement does not involve an agreement mismatch, but null spell-out of a dedicated Pers head in the extended nominal projection. In this configuration, the realization of the head encoding definiteness (the article) is independently possible, accounting for unagreement configurations. On the other hand, nominal structures that encode person features on the same functional head as definiteness prevent unagreement. This is the case of languages like Italian. Zero spell-out of the combined definiteness-person head cannot lead to an unagreement configuration, but could only lead to a configuration with a definite bare noun subject. While I do not have a proper explanation yet for how this is ruled out, the structural difference in DP structure seems to plausibly account for the cross-linguistic distribution of unagreement (at least in Indo-European).

References

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