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Agreement

Special Issue

Guest Editor

Greville G. Corbett

The syntactic environment in which agreement occurs is the **domain** of agreement. And when we indicate in what respect there is agreement, we are referring to agreement **features**. Thus number is an agreement feature, it has the **values** singular, dual, plural and so on.

The question of what is a possible agreement domain is one of the main issues tackled by **Maria Polinsky & Bernard Comrie** 'Agreement in Tsez'. After describing the agreement system in this Nakh-Daghestanian language, they show how certain matrix verbs can agree with a noun phrase in a lower clause, and show how this agreement can mark such a noun phrase as topic. This is a domain which many would have considered impossible, because of locality, and the existence of such an agreement pattern is a challenge to many existing theories of agreement. One possible solution to this problem would be to relativize the domain of agreement with respect to the status of the controller. Polinsky & Comrie also consider the controller problem of conjoined noun phrases (whether agreement is with one or all such noun phrases and if the latter what the feature values will be), an issue addressed also by Corbett.

Martin Haspelmath 'Long distance agreement in Godoberi (Daghestanian) complement clauses' tackles the same problem concerned with domains, showing how in Godoberi an absolutive argument can control agreement not only of the immediately governing verb but also of a superordinate verb. Given the difficulties this causes for constraining possible agreement systems, Haspelmath proposes a clause-union analysis. He also provides a diachronic perspective on this interesting construction.

Helma van den Berg 'Gender and person agreement in Akusha Dargi' continues with domain problems, and considers the coexistence of ergative-absolutive and nominative-accusative patterns of agreement in the Akusha dialect of Dargi (Nakh-Daghestanian). She too, having given a careful account of the current situation, gives a diachronic perspective. Her article is also a contribution to the understanding of agreement features, since Dargi, like almost all Nakh-Daghestanian languages, shows agreement in gender and number, but it also has agreement in person, which is much less usual for this family.

Kirk Belnap 'A new perspective on the history of Arabic variation in marking agreement with plural heads' is also concerned with features, in particular with the possibility of plural and feminine singular agreement when the head of the controller is a plural noun. The focus of the paper is the variation in agreement observed and the factors which influence it (taking up a theme from Polinsky & Comrie). His findings suggest that agreement variation in Arabic is meaningful and functional — a direct challenge to syntactic theories that portray agreement as redundant and semantically meaningless. This paper too has a diachronic part, and raises intriguing issues in the development of Arabic.

Michael Barlow 'Agreement as a discourse phenomenon' also considers Arabic, specifically the possibility of feminine singular agreement with a plural

head, as one case of several — from various languages — where he argues there are substantial difficulties for standard approaches to agreement. Based on cross-linguistic evidence for the functional nature of agreement, as well as early child acquisition data, he argues that agreement should be viewed rather differently, as a discourse phenomenon rather than as a matter of syntax.

Greville G. Corbett 'The place of agreement features in a specification of possible agreement systems' evidently focuses on features, suggesting that they contribute more to the complexity of agreement systems than is generally believed. He shows how they interact with domain problems (citing Dargi data, comparable to those of van den Berg). He then considers the feature values found with agreement with conjoined noun phrases, and the question of covert features (also raised in Polinsky & Comrie and in Barlow).

Anna Siewierska 'From anaphoric pronoun to grammatical agreement marker: why objects don't make it' takes data from an impressively wide range of languages. She considers the evolution of agreement targets from anaphoric pronoun to ambiguous marker to what she calls grammatical agreement (obligatory agreement markers which must be accompanied by overt nominal or pronominal arguments). She finds that while grammatical subject agreement is found, grammatical object agreement is not, and she suggests reasons for this interesting asymmetry.

In different ways all the papers illustrate the point that agreement is a fascinating problem in its own right. Rather than being a test for other phenomena, it is rather a test for theories, and at present it is proving a rather severe test. While we consider many languages in the collection, two families enjoy a special position: Nakh-Daghestanian (Tsez: Polinsky & Comrie, Godoberi: Haspelmath, Dargi: van den Berg, Tsakhur: Corbett) and Afro-Asiatic (Arabic: Belnap and Barlow, Miya: Corbett). This makes good sense, because the profusion of agreement in Nakh-Daghestanian and the specific domains discussed are forcing us to reconsider generally held notions on possible agreement systems. On the other hand, the tradition of research on languages like Arabic allows the very detailed work, particularly on variation, which opens up another rather different view of the nature of agreement.

In offering these different approaches, and in giving special attention to Nakh-Daghestanian and to Afro-Asiatic, we wish to honour two scholars who have made substantial contributions to the study of agreement and to the description of several of the languages represented here. The volume is dedicated with respect and affection to Aleksandr Kibrik and to the memory of Charles Ferguson.

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Note

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