

Patterns of syntactic agreement with embedded NPs

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Abstract

In this paper we analyze the different patterns of agreement found cross-linguistically with complex NPs involving an approximate numeral/quantifiers and a preposition, which selects an embedded NP. Verbal agreement can target either the numeral item/quantifier or the embedded NP. Languages differ on whether they allow agreement just with the quantifier (French, Barese), with the embedded NP (Occitan, Sardinian) or they show optional agreement with both quantifier and the embedded NP (Italian, Spanish). We will propose a syntactic account for such variation: it is linked to whether the PP that introduces the embedded NP is a phase or not. The configuration of the θ greed and the markedness of the ϕ features, then, are also involved into the present syntactic account.

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1. Introduction

Nominal constructions involving approximate numerals/quantifiers may show within and across languages different configurations of agreement: verbal agreement can target either the numeral item/quantifier or the embedded NP that bears the θ role interpretation.

- (1) un centinaio_i di senatori_k si sono dimessi_i/ è dimesso_i
a hundred of senators cl.refl are resigned.pl/ is resigned.sg
'A hundred senators have resigned.' *Italian*

According to [Brucart \(1997\)](#), [Demonte and Pérez-Jiménez \(2015\)](#) these nominal constructions are made of:

- (i) A **head** (the pseudo-quantifier/numeral/relational noun).
- (ii) A **tail** (the full lexical element embedded under the genitive construction).

The syntactic constructions which are the focus of the present study are generally labeled as 'pseudo-partitives' in the literature. The term 'pseudo' highlights the fact that *contra* real partitives they do not express a sub-set relation, involving more properly a measurement relation ([Selkirk, 1977](#); [Milner, 1978](#); [Schwarzschild, 2006](#)). Proper partitive NPs express a relation between two extensionally defined NPs (e.g. *un centinaio dei suoi amici*, '(about) a hundred of her friends') and

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thus involve a definite DP tail, interpreted as a ‘whole’, and a quantificational DP head interpreted as the ‘part’ (cf. Jackendoff, 1977; Barker, 1998, among others). In pseudo-partitives the DP to be interpreted as the whole (i.e. the tail) is a bare mass noun or a plural count noun, describing the objects or substances to be measured, while the head is generally an indefinite atomizer noun (e.g. piece), an indefinite container noun (e.g. glass) or a proper measure noun (i.e. inch) (Koptjevskaja-Tamm, 2001).¹

In this work, we will provide examples of the patterns of agreement triggered by these constructions in Romance languages (and beyond), showing that there exist:

- (a) Languages with **a double route of agreement** (with both the head and the tail) – Type A.
- (b) Languages with **agreement with the head** only (the proper syntactic agreement) – Type B.
- (c) Languages with **agreement with the tail** only (the so-called semantic agreement) – Type C.

To our knowledge, the identification of Type C languages in the typology outlined above has not been previously acknowledged in the literature.

We will argue that differential agreement patterns reflect a genuine syntactic phenomenon (and not a mere interpretative path – as often semantic agreement has been argued to be). We will support this view showing some syntactic regularities (and asymmetries) in the patterns of agreement, especially in small clause and depending on the syntactic features of the lexical elements involved in Type A languages.

The exploration of embedded NP agreement is not trivial, from the perspective of theoretical linguistics. Indeed, the theoretical implication of the double route of agreement, as well as tail agreement contrasts with the statements of the theory of Agree developed in Chomsky (2000, 2001), where a functional head F agrees with XP only if:

- (a) F c-commands XP (the C-command Condition).
- (b) There is no YP such that F c-commands YP, YP c-commands XP, and YP has ϕ -features (the Intervention Condition).
- (c) F and XP are contained in all the same phases (e.g. full CPs) (the Phase Condition).

The paper is structured, as follow: after an empirical characterization of the phenomena under discussion, we will review three previous accounts of the embedded NP agreement (structural ambiguity, percolation of features, two different sets of features) and shows how the first two cannot account for the various agreement patterns (head, tail, either) found among the Romance varieties. We will build on the idea (Danon, 2013; Demonte and Pérez-Jiménez, 2015) that an NP “carries not one, but two sets of syntactic agreement features”, one set constraining the referential index and the other set related to NP-internal concord. Mismatches result in different agreement patterns. The different agreement patterns allow for two different interpretations at LF. Nevertheless, we will show that the “double-set” approach fails to account for some data (post-verbal subjects, small clauses, raising predicates) and the pattern of agreement of the languages allowing only the tail to be the target of the Agree operation (e.g. Sardinian, which is a Type C language according to our typology). Thus, our proposal involves a parameter on the connecting PP and on the role of predication. Specifically, the PP involved in such constructions introduces a phase boundary in some varieties but not in others, and it can determine the agreement patterns with the quantifier-like head or with the embedded tail NP. This analysis overcomes some of the problems of the “double-set” approach (Danon, 2013; Demonte and Pérez-Jiménez, 2015).

2. The data

2.1. Languages with a double route of agreement: Type A languages

In Italian with approximate numerals/quantifiers verbal agreement can target either the numeral item/quantifier or the noun embedded under the preposition *di* (of) that bears a θ role interpretation. Consider the data in (2), in which the verb is free to agree either with the (singular) quantifier (*centinaio*, *dozzina*) or the (plural) noun (*senatori*, *tifosi*) embedded under the partitive/genitive adposition *di* (of).

- (2) Una dozzina_i di tifosi_k hanno_k/ha_i cercato di aggredirmi *Italian*
 a dozen of fans have/has tried of attack.inf.cl.1sg
 ‘A dozen fans tried to attack me’

¹ Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2001) demonstrates that pseudo-partitives derive from real partitives in a historical perspective. This is argued to be a grammaticalization process triggered by the fact that pseudo-partitive items are nouns from a historical point of view, but in pseudo-partitive constructions they are used as elements that are not typical nouns (e.g. they lack referentiality).

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