



# The role of morphology in setting production biases in agreement: A cross-linguistic completion study

J. Carlos Acuña-Fariña

Departamento de Inglés, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Avda. Castela, s/n., Santiago de Compostela 15782, Coruña, Spain



## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 2 January 2017

Received in revised form 16 November 2017

Accepted 19 December 2017

### Keywords:

Agreement

Cross-linguistic

Spanish

Portuguese

## ABSTRACT

Agreement has always posed a puzzle to both linguists and psycholinguists because, both cross-linguistically and intra-linguistically, grammatical biases and processing biases exhibit a seemingly capricious mixture of form regulation and semantic interference. English in particular is famous for the latter. This work explores the thesis that agreement in production is sensitive to the size of the morphological component of every language. To be precise, the idea is that the richer the morphology of a language, the greater the formal encapsulation of its agreement operations is likely to be. Conversely, the poorer the morphology the more semantic interference (agreement *ad sensum*) will be attested. Four completion studies carried out with two dialectal versions of Spanish and two dialectal versions of Portuguese support this thesis. Both versions of both languages differ in morphological strength: thus, whereas the Spanish spoken in the south of Spain is characterized by acute morphological erosion, the one spoken in the north preserves an intact morphology. The difference is even greater between European Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, whose profound morphological erosion is well-known. The tests show robust effects of the morphology in the predicted direction, with the two varieties with intact morphologies showing statistically less probability of semantic interfacing. These results provide important evidence to bear on the nature of agreement.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

A perennially disconcerting property of agreement is that neither cross-linguistically nor intra-linguistically can it be analyzed as a perfect system of either form or meaning, the reason being that agreement relationships are solidly affected by *both* form pressures and conceptual pressures simultaneously in various ways (Corbett, 2006; Eberhard et al., 2005; Acuña-Fariña, 2009). Perhaps English is the clearest case known. In principle the grammar of this language regulates agreement as the systematic covariance of morphological forms. This means that a feature on a head noun (plural) is replicated on determiners and verbs if these code a number distinction (e.g. *these cars* vs *this car*; *this car is big* vs *these cars are big*). This is the default scenario. However, ever since Morgan (1972; see also Pollard and Sag, 1994 and Kathol, 1999), we have known that this form harmony is often abandoned in favor of form/meaning mismatches. Mismatches often result in controllers of agreement relations imposing different features on different targets (as in (1) below where *committee(-sg)* imposes singular number on the determiner but plural number on the verb). In general, whenever that is the case, one can see agreement patterns established *ad sensum*. In all of the following, semantic control is easily discernible:

E-mail address: [carlos.acuna.farina@usc.es](mailto:carlos.acuna.farina@usc.es).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2017.12.008>

0388-0001/© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

- (1) This *committee are* satisfied with the proposal
- (2) Tonight on MTV, Bill Clinton faces the *generation* that *holds* the future in *their* hands
- (3) That three *days* in Athens *was* amazing
- (4) We seem to be a bit displeased with *ourself* today, Mr Jones (a nurse in a hospital; Joseph, 1979)
- (5) The hash *browns* at table four *is* getting angry (a client at a restaurant; Pollard and Sag, 1994)

Linguists have developed various ways of dealing with this semantic interference. A notable breakthrough in this type of research was Corbett's (1979; 2006) *Agreement Hierarchy* (AH), captured here as (6):

(6) The Agreement Hierarchy

For any controller that permits alternative agreements, as we move rightwards along the Agreement Hierarchy, the likelihood of agreement with greater semantic justification will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease). (p. 2006: 207).

Attributive > predicate > relative pronoun > personal pronoun

The AH neatly explains a substantial part of agreement phenomena in the world's languages. It shows that even conceptual pressure (agreement *ad sensum*) is sensitive to hierarchical constituent structure in the sense that it is this structure that determines when semantics can and when it cannot do the agreement job alone. Thus, basically when structural distance between controllers and targets is small, as in *this-sg committee(-sg)*, agreement is resolved formally inside the phrase with no semantic interference (*\*these committee*). However, when that distance is large, typically across phrases, semantics intervenes, overriding form and creating mismatches. In (7) below agreement takes place between a subject phrase and a predicate phrase; in (8) between an antecedent NP and a pronoun in another clause. In both cases some relative distance between controllers and targets makes mismatches grammatically possible:

- (7) Tables, chairs and even the new sofas(-pl) *is(-sg)* fine but another new car is too much
- (8) My niece works for Zara(-sg). They(-pl) *pay* her very well

Other explanatory accounts like Wechsler's bifurcation of agreement coindexations into a more formally regulated *Concord* path and a more semantically guided *Index* path capture the variable nature of agreement in similar ways (Wechsler & Zlatic 2003; Wechsler, 2011; Wechsler & Hahm 2011). The idea is that concord features work phrase-internally whereas index features are referential indices that tend to operate less locally. These latter are somewhat more loosely allowed to be resolved via mismatches in a sort of 'elsewhere condition' that is also captured in Baker's (2008: 24) claim that 'semantic agreement appears when grammatical agreement fails'.

While the AH and similar strategies like the concord/index distinction have received considerable empirical support, they do not account for the entirety of agreement facts. Sometimes there is nothing wrong in the form component, and yet agreement is 'infiltrated' by conceptual pressures anyway (Foote and Bock, 2012), even in the short distances, as in *that three days in Athens was great*. A conspicuous lacuna in most linguistic approaches is that they make no principled room for the role that morphology plays in setting agreement patterns. The purpose of this work is to study precisely that. Section 2 provides a background for the idea that morphology regulates agreement operations and it also introduces the nature of the present study. Section 3 contains the four completion studies. Finally, Section 4 provides a general discussion.

## 2. The role of morphology in agreement

Berg (1998) carried out a completion study in which he compared agreement choices in two populations of speakers: German and American. For each language group he devised a questionnaire with a number of empty slots that had to be filled. These slots presented well-known agreement uncertainties. For instance, his category I included collectives that could be resolved either in the singular or in the plural. Category III contained so-called number-transparent nouns like *bunch*, *gang*, *number* or *series* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 504 ff.), as in *a number of objects* or *that series of reports*. For this category in particular, American and German choices differed greatly in that the former preferred to establish agreement with the second noun (say, *a number of objects WERE removed*) whereas the latter opted for the putative head noun (the first in the complex noun phrase, CNP). That is, the English choices revealed semantic infiltration in the resolution of agreement (the phrase *a number of objects* is really about objects, not about 'a number' so agreement is established with this 'semantic head'), whereas the German ones revealed nothing but the prototypical formal agreement with the head of the CNP: if the first noun is singular, agreement with the verb is in the singular; if plural then it is in the plural.

Berg reasoned that the cause for the difference is the morphology, rich in German but scant in English. In particular, according to him, when a language has a strong morphosyntactic component and it implements agreement operations very frequently, these operations become automatic procedures that insulate agreement resolution from conceptual interfacing. In a word, when morphosyntax is strong, agreement *ad sensum* becomes weak; when morphosyntax is poor, meaning is often summoned to establish connections between constituents. Rather than 'summoned', in fact, Berg's idea is that in a production

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7533810>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7533810>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)