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On agreement and its relationship to case: Some generative ideas and results☆

Mark C. Baker*

Rutgers University, Department of Linguistics, 18 Seminary Place, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA

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Abstract

This article surveys some leading generative ideas about agreement and case, and connects them to several universal and near-universal observations noted by typologists. It begins with the familiar fact that adjectives can agree with noun phrases in number and gender but not in person, whereas verbs can agree in person as well—depending on the structure. From there it moves to the fact that verbs typically do not agree with their objects unless they also agree with their subjects. Several possible types of agreement with objects are then identified and distinguished, and some substantive similarities between object agreement and subject agreement are noted. It is shown that both subject agreement and object agreement are sensitive to the case morphology borne by the noun phrase (dative versus accusative, ergative versus nominative) in some languages but not in others, and the implications of this result for the assignment of case are considered. In all, the discussion covers four known linguistic universals in the area of agreement and case, and proposes three new ones. These are all explained in terms of two universal properties of the agreement relation and one parameter.
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1. Introduction

Some prominent recent literature has challenged the notion of language universals and a universal grammar (Bickel, 2007; Dunn et al., 2011; Evans and Levinson, 2009). This literature claims that, as we collect more data from a wider range of languages and use it to construct large typological databases, we find that there are counterexamples to essentially every substantive and interesting universal property of languages that has been proposed. Indeed, we find (they say) that language seems to vary without clearly defined limits, subject primarily to cultural and historical factors. This has been taken to undermine the foundations of the formal-generative-syntactic approach to linguistics in particular, because that has long been associated with the idea that natural human languages are constrained by a rich, powerful, and innate

☆ Abbreviations used in this article include: ABS, absolutive; ACC, accusative; ACT, active; AOR, aorist; CAUS, causative; CIS, cislocative; DAT, dative; DJ, disjunctive; ERG, ergative; F, feminine; FAC, factitive; FACT, factual; FUT, future; FV, final vowel (Bantu); GEN, genitive; GER, gerund; HAB, habitual; IMPF, imperfective; IND, indicative; INDEF, indefinite; INF, infinitive; M, masculine; NE, prenominal particle (Mohawk); NEG, negative; NOM, nominative; NOML, nominalizer; OM, object marker; PASS, passive; PAST, past tense; PERF, perfective; PL, plural; POSS, possessor; PP, past perfective; PRES, present; PTPL, participle; PUNC, punctual; SG, singular; SM, subject marker; STAT, stative; T, tense marker; TH, translocative. The glosses of an agreement marker may include a number (1, 2, 3, . . .) expressing the person or (in a Bantu language) the gender/noun class, a letter (s or p) expressing the number, a letter (M, F, N) expressing the gender, and a letter (S, O) expressing the grammatical function of the agreed-with nominal.

* Tel.: +1 732 932 7289.
E-mail address: mabaker@rucc.rutgers.edu.

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universal grammar (UG), which is essentially constant across the human species (Chomsky, 1965, 1981). Also implicit or explicit in this work is the claim that further progress will be made primarily by increasing the size of our typological databases, by applying more sophisticated statistics to that data, and by emphasizing cultural and historical modes of explanation.

In the light of these claims, it is reasonable to ask questions like the following. First, are there bona fide linguistic universals that stand up to scrutiny over a wide range of languages? Second, can formal generative grammar play any distinctive role in discovering such universals? Third, for any such universals, can generative grammar play a distinctive role in explaining them? These are questions of great interest and significance for cognitive science anyway, and would be worth considering even if they had not been posed in critical fashion in articles like the ones mentioned.

In this work, I explore these questions within the specific domains of agreement and case-marking, claiming that the answer to all three questions seems to be yes, despite some bold claims to the contrary. I show that there are ideas and results in this domain that researchers can make use of in their own investigations with reasonable confidence.

2. Characterizing the domain of agreement and case

My primary emphasis is on the phenomenon of agreement. This can be characterized roughly as morphological marking on one word in a clause or other syntactic unit that reflects the features of another expression within that unit. A prototypical example is the finite verb agreeing with a noun phrase functioning as its subject. This happens in a limited way in English (1), and much more robustly in Bantu languages like Kinande (2):

(1) a. *The woman buys fruit each day in the market.*
b. *The women buy fruit each day in the market.*

(2) a. *Abakali* *ba-a-gul-a* *eritunda*. (Kinande (Baker, 2008))
woman.2 2S-T-buy-FV fruit.5
'The women bought a fruit.'
b. *Omukali* *a-gul-a* *eritunda.*
woman.1 1S.T-buy-FV fruit.5
'The woman bought a fruit.'

A secondary interest of this article is the phenomenon of case. This can be characterized roughly as morphological marking on a noun phrase (NP) or similar expression that reflects its grammatical relationship to the central verb of the clause, or to another key word in the syntactic unit that the NP is found in (e.g., to the preposition that heads a prepositional phrase). For example, pronouns in English take a different form depending on whether they function as the subject of a finite verb or as its object, as in (3). Similar differences are seen more robustly on NPs of all sorts in languages like Japanese (4).

(3) a. *I usually find* ***him*** *in the park.*
b. ***He*** *usually finds me in the park.*

(4) a. *John-no* *imooto-ga* *sinda*. (Kuno, 1973:6)
John-GEN sister-NOM died
'John's sister died.'
b. *John-ga* *Mary-ni* *hon-o* *yatta* (Kuno, 1973:5)
John-NOM Mary-DAT book-ACC gave
'John gave Mary a book.'

If case and agreement are defined relatively narrowly, they are opposites: agreement is morphology on (say) the verb that is determined by features of a nearby NP, and case is morphology on an NP that is determined by properties of a nearby verb. Speaking more broadly, they are similar topics in that both involve the morphology of one linguistic expression being determined by its relationship to another expression within the same syntactic unit. This is one reason why the two topics are often treated together. A more specific reason is that many languages seem to follow rules that relate the two directly, such as ''A verb agrees with the NP which has nominative case.'' The status of such connections is one of the issues that I consider below.

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