

Target Number Markedness and Polite Plurals

Number agreement presents us with the following paradox. Some data clearly indicate that agreement is driven by the morphology of the subject trigger, ignoring semantics if needed (1), while other data just as clearly suggest semantic agreement (2).

- (1) a. His clothes are/*is dirty but his hands are clean.
 b. His clothing *are/ is dirty but his hands are clean.
- (2) a. [His lifelong companion and the editor of his autobiography] **is/are** at his bedside.
 (**is**: 1 person / **are**: 2 people) (Farkas and Zec 1993, inter alia)
 b. To err is human, to forgive divine. (Alexander Pope).
 c. To err and to forgive are/*is human and divine, respectively.
 d. To err and to forgive are/*is equally/both human.
 e. To start a war and to blame the enemy is/#are hypocritical.

We offer a solution to this paradox, then apply that solution to polite 2nd person plurals.

The proposed solution builds upon the notion of plural as distributionally unmarked relative to singular (McCawley 1968, Krifka 1989, Sauerland et al 2005, inter alia). However, we apply this idea not (just) to the nominal but to the agreement *target* (here, the finite verb) and furthermore assume that *the singular verb is marked both semantically and morphologically* while plural fills in elsewhere, as illustrated here with *is/are*:

(3)	SG	PL
non-aggregate	is	
aggregate		are

(*aggregate* = cardinality greater than one, i.e. ‘semantic plural’, or perhaps a ‘weak plural’ blocked by singular where appropriate (Sauerland et al 2005, inter alia); *non-aggregate* = semantic singular or mass). As shown here, the singular verb contributes (or else unifies with) both ‘*non-aggregate*’ semantics and the formal feature [NUM SG] on the subject. The plural verb form emerges when the singular can’t be used, because either: (i) the subject is an NP morphologically marked [NUM PL], hence clashes with the verb’s formal [NUM SG] feature; or (ii) the semantics of the subject denotes an ‘aggregate’ that can’t satisfy the singular verb’s ‘non-aggregate’ semantics. (Under the ‘weak plural’ analysis, the default must be *non-persistent* (Lascarides et al 1995), i.e. resolved prior to insertion.)

This solves the paradox in (1)-(2). Subjects headed by a Noun bearing a formal NUM feature trigger the value for NUM (1). Subjects lacking a head Noun— either because they are exocentric (2a) or because they are headed by a non-noun, which lacks the NUM feature (2b-e)— are predicted to allow singular or plural verbs depending on semantics, with the verb assigning [NUM SG] or [NUM PL], respectively. In short, the subject of a plural verb must be either morphologically or semantically plural (or both), this disjunction arising from the unmarked verb’s ‘elsewhere distribution’.

This account of number agreement predicts that *when the trigger lacks a NUM feature, then this forces a semantic interpretation of the number morphology marked on the agreement target*. Now, let us assume that some 1st and/or 2nd person pronouns in some languages lack a NUM feature, distinguished instead by clusterings of speech act participants and others,

essentially following Cysouw 2002. We do not assume this for all 1/2pers pronouns in all languages (see Corbett 2007, ALT). We predict that, *ceteris paribus*, *NUM-less pronouns trigger semantic agreement, while NUM-marked pronouns trigger morphological agreement*. This idea will be applied to several languages, including French, Persian, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, and Russian. Two examples:

1. French. Suppose French *vous* ‘you.pl/polite’ lacks a NUM feature. Another feature, perhaps PERSON, distinguishes *vous~tu*, and also distinguishes the agreeing finite 1pers/2pers Verb forms (e.g. *êtes* in (4)). This correctly predicts that predicate adjectives impose semantic number on local pronouns (modulo the pronoun’s inherent meaning), leading to an apparent number agreement mismatch between verb and adjective:

- (4) Vous êtes loyal. / loyaux.
 you.PL be.2.PL loyal.M.SG / loyal.PL
 ‘You (one formal male addressee) are loyal.’ /
 ‘You (addressee + associate(s)) are loyal.’

That is, despite the gloss in (4) *vous* is not exactly plural but rather indicates a set containing at least the addressee (blocked where appropriate by the ‘intimate singular’ form *tu*). This solves the paradox of French predicate adjectives, just like the English (1)-(2) above: while number on the adjective has semantic force with NUM-less 1st and 2nd person subjects as in (4), pluralia tantum subjects trigger plural on adjectives regardless of meaning.

2. Serbo-Croatian. Suppose the Serbo-Croatian nominative polite 2.PL pronoun *vi* is marked for NUM; non-nominative ones are NUM-less (cross-linguistically, nominative paradigms often show more distinctions than other cases). This immediately explains why nominatives trigger uniform morphological agreement (5a), while non-nominatives trigger semantic agreement (5b).

- (5) a. Vi ste duhovit-i.
 you.PL.NOM AUX.2PL funny-M.PL
 ‘You (one formal addressee or multiple addressees) are funny.’
- b. Ja vas smatram duhovit-om.
 I you.ACC consider funny-INST.F.SG
 ‘I consider you (one formal female addressee) funny.’

Further evidence from reflexives and attributive modifiers will be presented.

This analysis will be formalized in LFG. It could probably be recast in most frameworks, but is most amenable to *feature-merging* theories (Barlow 1992). On such theories, features of the so-called trigger and target unify symmetrically or, in some cases, exhibit a mild asymmetry via checking (LFG *constraining equations*). To the extent that a trigger-target asymmetry holds, it is not fixed by the syntax proper but rather reflects markedness patterns of inflected words. Hence when the so-called ‘trigger’ is unmarked for a feature, it does not, strictly speaking, ‘trigger’ agreement; instead the feature of the ‘target’ is expressed.