

In Defense of “Unmotivated” Phi-Probes

Some languages, such as West Flemish, Dutch and Hollandic, exhibit morphological agreement in unexpected places, such as on complementizers and the answers to yes/no questions (1 and 2). Previous explanations of these agreement phenomena have either treated them only as synchronic, ignoring their diachronic source or have suggested that they are not part of the narrow syntax. I propose instead that rare agreement patterns are part of the narrow syntax synchronically but that their diachronic sources are not irrelevant and can have a significant impact on their surface forms.

(1) a. Kpeinzen *dan-k(ik)*morgen goan.

I-think that-I(I)tomorrowgo

‘I think that I’ll go tomorrow.’

b. Kpeinzen *da-j (gie)*morgen goat.

I-think that-you(you)tomorrow go

‘I think that you’ll go tomorrow.’

(West Flemish, Haegeman, 1992)

(2)a. Mog-e=we morgen naar Gent?

Ja-d-e=we

May-1pl=we tomorrow to Ghent

Yes-1pl=we

“Can we go to Ghent tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

b. Mog-e=ze morgen naar Gent?

Ja-d-e=ze

May-3pl=they tomorrow to Ghent

Yes-3pl=they

“Can they go to Ghent tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

(Hollandic, De Vogelaer and van der Auwera, 2010)

Zwart (2012), working from de Vodelaer and van der Auwera’s (2010) diachronic account of the spread of agreement on Dutch complementizers, proposes that complementizer agreement is an interface phenomenon, derived analogically from the subject-verb relationship. Verb-subject pronoun order in non-subject initial main clauses (as in 3) bear a resemblance to complementizer-subject pronoun order in subordinates (as in 4), and the agreement is transferred to the complementizer in (3).

(3) Morgen zal hij het boek lezen (Dutch, DeVogelaer and van der Auwera (2010)

Tomorrow will he that book read

(4) Ik geloof dat hij het boek morgen zal lezen

I believe that he that book tomorrow will read.

Both de Vodelaer and van der Auwera (2010) and Zwart (2012) treat agreement between complementizers and full DPs as a “further extension” of the paradigm rather than as regular syntactic agreement.

However, analogy and pattern extension cannot be used as meaningful explanations for synchronic phenomena. In this paper, I argue that rare phi-agreements must be brought back into the synchronic narrow syntax regardless of their diachronic source. Although analogy is a rich source of agreement relations, once the analogy is complete the agreement should be indistinguishable from a non-analogically sourced probe-goal construction. Zwart’s model requires speakers to have access to two different agreement processes: a syntactic relation for verbal agreement, and a regular and systematic “online” analogy for complementizer agreement. This system is unnecessarily complex.

Arguments against a narrow syntax approach to rare agreement relations often rely on the undesirability of creating “stipulative” agreement probes or of having agreement probes exist in

non-phase heads. This paper claims that reanalysis and grammaticalization can cause phi-probes to sprout in places that are otherwise “unmotivated.”

In light of recent treatments of the theory of grammaticalization, such flexibility in the location of probes is even desirable. Van Gelderen (2009) proposes that one of the fundamental driving forces of the cycle of linguistic change is the greater economy of uninterpretable features than interpretable ones, i.e. goals will be reanalyzed as probes. Under this understanding, I give rare agreement types the status of true agreement relations formed by grammaticalization. I discuss two main types of reanalysis that generate new phi-probes: 1) the Dutch -type above which are derived through the interpretable > uninterpretable feature pathway described by van Gelderen and 2) cases of one type of phi-probe being reanalyzed as another, e.g, verbal agreement as complementizer agreement.

The verb > complementizer change - carrying phi-probes along for the ride - has been proposed as a diachronic source for the agreement between complementizers and matrix subjects in languages like Lubukusu.

- (5) a. baba-ndu ba-bol-el-a Alfredi ba-li a-kha-khil-e
2-people 2S-said-AP-FV 1Alfred 2-that 1S-FUT-conquer
‘The people told Alfred that he will win.’
b. Alfredi ka-bol-el-a baba-ndu a-li ba-kha-khil-e
1Alfred 1S-said-AP-FV 2-person 1-that 2S-FUT-conquer
‘Alfred told the people that they will win.’ (Lubukusu, Diercks, 2011)

Following Diercks (2011) I will treat both Lubukusu-type and Germanic-type complementizer agreement synchronically as instances of Agree, i.e., part of the narrow syntax.

These two sources of complementizer agreement are both examples of reanalysis that yield new phi-probes in functional heads that did not previously contain them. The Germanic cases represent a case of van Gelderen’s (2009) cycle in which interpretable features yield uninterpretable features. The Lubukusu case is instead a case of uninterpretable features shifting from a cross-linguistically common location - a verbal TP - to a less common one - a C-head. Requiring that such reanalyses yield probes only in locations that are theoretically motivated over-restricts syntactic change. Ruling out such changes requires us to attribute powers to the grammar that are undesirable. Diachronically, a grammar that restricts the places certain kinds of probes can occur should be resistant to many well-documented types of reanalysis. The ability of phi-probes to sprout in non-phase heads and to form synchronically “normal” probe-goal relations in those positions, allows us to account for cross-linguistic variation in rare agreement relations without losing uniformity in the underlying system.

References: **De Vogelaer, Gunther and Johan van der Auwera**. 2010. When typological rara generate rarissima: analogical extension of verbal agreement in Dutch dialects. In *Rara & Rarissima: Documenting the Fringes of Linguistic Diversity*. Jan Wohlgemuth and Michael Cysouw (Eds.) de Gruyter & Co. •**Diercks, Michael**. 2011. Indirect Agree in Lubukusu complementizer agreement. To appear in NLLT. lingBuzz/001335. •**Haegeman, Liliane**. 1992. *Theory and description in generative syntax: A case study in West Flemish*. Cambridge Studies in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. •**van Gelderen, Elly**. 2009. Feature Economy in the Linguistic Cycle. *Historical Syntax and Linguistic Theory*. Crisma, P. and Longobardi, G. eds. Oxford University Press. •**Zwart, Jan-Wouter** 2012. Agreement Without Agree. Paper Presented at Generative Initiatives in Syntactic Theory 6. Ghent, October 17, 2012. <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~zwart/>