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More hybrid agreement: simultaneous agreement with two competing triggers

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In some constructions, an agreement target can optionally agree with one or another possible trigger. This is illustrated by the French example in (1) below, which presents a case of agreement between a VP and a quantitative subject involving two DPs ('a large number of my friends').

(1) a. Un grand nombre de mes copains est génial.
   b. Un grand nombre de mes copains sont géniaux.

   A large number of my friends (a) is awesome / (b) are awesome.

The VP (copula and predicative adjective) can agree with either DP: it can – syntactically it seems – agree with the singular head DP as in (a), or – semantically it seems – with the plural embedded DP as in (b). The need for both syntactically-based and semantically-based agreements has been discussed in the literature (a.o. Morgan 1984, Pullum 1985, Corbett 1991, Wechsler and Zlatić 2003, Sauerland 2004): in particular, similar cases of mixed agreement patterns such as polite plurals or pluralia tantum have been related to an Agreement Hierarchy (a.o. Comrie 1975, Corbett 1983, 2006, Wechsler and Hahn 2011).

The new observation that we make is that the VP can simultaneously agree with both triggers. When the two DPs that are possible agreement triggers vary in two features, the VP can agree in one feature with one DP and in the other feature with the other DP. Such hybrid agreement is illustrated in (2) for the case where the two DPs vary in number and gender.

(2) a. (i) ? Un grand nombre de mes copines est folle.
    (ii) * Un grand nombre de mes copines sont fous.

    A large number of my friends (i) is crazy / (ii) are crazy.

b. (i) ? Une majorité de mes copains est fou.
    (ii) * Une majorité de mes copains sont folles.

    A majority of my friends (i) is crazy / (ii) are crazy.
(2a-i) shows that the VP est folle (fem. ‘is crazy’) can agree in number with the masculine singular DP1 un grand nombre (‘a large number’), but in gender with the feminine plural DP2 mes copines (fem. ‘my friends’). Although possibly degraded (as indicated by ?), this sentence is clearly much better than (2a-ii), which involves the ‘reverse’ agreement - in gender with DP1 and in number with DP2. In (2b), we reproduce similar facts by exchanging the gender features on the DPs.

Note that the acceptability of (2{a/b}i) is not due to an agreement mismatch between the copula and the predicative adjective: even though there is no phonological difference between the singular form (fou) and the plural form (fous) of the adjective, the sentence (2b) cannot be analyzed as est[sg,fem] fous[pl,masc] where the copula would agree with the head DP une majorité[sg,fem] and the adjective with the embedded DP mes copains[pl,masc]. This is demonstrated by example (3) below involving the adjective génial (‘awesome’), which takes a different form in the (masculine) singular and plural: the (masculine) plural form géniaux is unacceptable in the configuration of (2b).

(3) * Une majorité de mes copains est géniaux.
   A majority[sg,fem] of my friends[pl,masc] is [pl] awesome[pl,masc].

Similarly, (4) exemplifies hybrid agreement for another pair of features, i.e. when the two DPs vary in number and person: (4i) where the VP agrees in person with DP1 but in number with DP2 is perfectly acceptable, as opposed to (4ii) with reverse agreement.

(4) (i) Une majorité d’entre nous sont loyaux.
    A major-part[pl,3rd] among us[pl,1st] (i) are loyal[pl,3rd] / (ii) am loyal[sg,1st]
    (ii) *Une majorité d’entre nous suis loyaux.

We thus add a new empirical fact to the realm of hybrid agreement patterns. It is not only the case - as previously observed - that some constructions allow agreement to have several possible triggers. But we also observe that subject-VP agreement can be hybrid in the sense that different phi-features on a VP can be triggered by different DPs contained in the subject. Furthermore, not all hybrid agreements are acceptable, but we have observed different degrees of acceptability depending on the agreement configuration. All these facts remain mysterious under existing proposals.

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