Pragmatic’ agreement and the syntax/pragmatics interface: a case study

Romance languages are known to display morphological agreement in number and person between the subject and the verb, which is not marked for gender in its finite forms. In this paper, I wish to bring to light some extraordinary data on agreement in the Romance variety of Ripatransone (RT), a central Italian dialect (see Parrino 1967, Harder 1998). In RT, unlike other Romance varieties, the finite verb is marked for gender (1). This characteristic becomes even more striking in sentences like (2), where agreement mismatch between the subject (SU) and the object (OB) gender features is marked on the verb, or in (3), where an animacy mismatch between SU and OB is marked on the verb. Agreement mismatches of this sort have often been observed for languages like Basque and Georgian (see Hale 2001, Bejar & Rezac 2007, Wiltshchko 2008 among others on person mismatches resulting in person hierarchy effects) but never for Romance, and rarely for gender (Corbett 1991). According to Chomsky (2005 and ff.), Agree takes place between a Probe with unvalued features and a Goal with valued ones. How is agreement in (2) or (3) possible?

I propose that syntactic features are more articulated than is assumed in current syntactic theory (see also Harley & Ritter 2002, Dechaine & Wiltshchko 2002), and that each $\phi$-feature is further enriched with a $\sigma$-subfeature (see 4). While main $\phi$-features encode lexically determined syntactic values, $\sigma$-subfeatures encode semantico-pragmatically determined syntactic values. $\sigma$-subfeatures on pronouns and referential nouns enter the derivation unvalued, and get their valuation through Agree with the Speech Act head (Sigurdhsson 2004), or the init head (Ramchand 2006), or with whatever head encodes information about the event participants and/or the (prominent) discourse referent(s). Observe that a $\sigma$-subfeature is not a further specification of the main feature, but a 'secondary', pragmatically determined value for the same feature. The value of the $\sigma$-subfeature can be, but most of the time is not, different from the value of the main $\phi$-feature.

Languages differ with respect to whether Agree targets the main $\phi$-set or the $\sigma$-subfeature set: Unvalued $\phi$-features on functional heads can be valued by the syntactic ‘main’ $\phi$-feature set of the Goal, or by its $\sigma$-subfeature set, or even by both.

RT operates on ‘pragmatic’ $\sigma$-subfeature Agree. The unvalued $\phi$-features on T/v are hence valued by $\sigma$-subfeatures. Given this pragmatic orientation of the language, Agree does not take place in RT simply between the SU/OB and the verb, but the verb (in T or v) can Agree with the element which is pragmatically most prominent. Moreover, all elements that have unvalued $\sigma$-features in the domain of the most prominent element must show overt agreement with it: In RT even adverbs, wh-elements and gerunds exhibit gender agreement (5) with the pragmatically most prominent element. The agreement mismatch in (2-3) simply follows from there being more than one pragmatically prominent element in the sentence. The verb cyclically $\sigma$-Agrees with both SU and OB (Bejar & Rezac 2007) and gets a neuter ending at PF marking this mismatch. Agreement in RT is therefore pragmatically determined. If this is true, we expect to find cases in which the pragmatically prominent element drives agreement to the detriment of SU/OB. This is indeed the case in (6), where the verb Agrees with the topicalised indirect object (IO), which is more prominent than the SU/OB. In (6), Agree is established between the $\sigma$–subfeatures of the IO Mario, masculine, and the verb. Note that $\sigma$–subfeature Agree takes place in the narrow syntax and is sensitive to syntactic constraints (in RT it is blocked in biclausal causatives (7) and allowed with modal verbs (8)).

RT is a very consistent ‘semantico-pragmatic’ agreement system, but other instances of this kind are known. Consider the data in (9) from Italian. These data, unexplainable through current syntactic theory, exhibit apparent agreement optionality of the verb with SU or OB. However, if we consider $\sigma$–subfeatures, agreement in (9) follows without further ado: the pp simply agrees with the $\sigma$–subfeatures of the most prominent discourse element. Hence, in Italian, Agree usually targets the Goal’s $\phi$-features but in cases of particularly relevant pragmatic prominence, $\sigma$–subfeatures can also be probed for. Observe that this $\sigma$-subfeature agreement, although apparently more complex, is actually more economical than postulating a completely different operation, Concord, for cases morphological agreement within a DP involving elements that are ‘silent’, like adjectives and determiners, that would not be ‘visible’ to Agree (see Carstens 2000, Di Sciullo 2005, and others) (see 10).
Examples

(1) a. Issu ridu he-sg masc laughs-3rd sg masc
   b. Esse ride she-sg fem laughs-3rd sg fem
   ‘He laughs’  ‘She laughs’

(2) a. Mamme cucinò li maccarù mum- sg fem cooks-neuter the- pl masc pasta- pl masc
   ‘Mum cooked pasta’
   b. Babbu dicò le varitá dad- sg masc says- neuter the- sg fem truth- sg fem
   ‘Dad told the truth’

(3) Issu li cucinò subbòta he- sg masc an them-pl masc inan. cooks-3rd sg neu immediately
   ‘He cooks them immediately’

(4) \([u/v \, \varphi_1], [u/v \, \varphi_2], [u/v \, \sigma_2] [u/v \, \sigma_3]\)

(5) a. Esse magne mena she-fem eats-fem less-fem
   ‘She eats less’
   b. Issu magnu menu he-masc eats-masc less-masc
   ‘He eats less’
   c. Quandu cuostu? how much-masc costs-masc
   ‘How much does it-masc cost?’
   d. Quande cuoste? how much-fem costs-fem
   ‘How much does it-fem cost?’

(6) A Giovanni, Marie (jò) diciu sembra lò verità to John Maria (to him-masc) says-masc always the truth-fem
   ‘Mary always tells the truth to John’

(7) Tà facciu reccoja li diienda to you make-1st sg masc collect-inf neu the-pl masc teeth-masc
   ‘I’m going to make you collect your teeth’ (Rossi 2007:242 in Jones 2007)

(8) Lu bbova nèn vo’ bbevu the-sg masc ox-masc sg not wants to-drink-masc
   ‘The ox doesn’t want to drink’ (Rossi 2007: 238 in Jones 2007)

(9) a. Maria si è lavata le mani Mary-fem sg refl is washed-pp fem sg the hands-fem pl
   ‘Mary washed her hands’
   b. Maria si è lavate le mani Mary-fem sg refl is washed-pp fem pl the hands-fem pl
   ‘Mary washed her hands’

(10) Quella bella casa rossa that-sg fem beautiful-sg fem house-sg fem red-sg fem
    ‘That beautiful red house’