

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

**Do formal models constrain language description? The
case of verbal agreement morphology**

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Paper: *Do formal models constrain language description? - The case of verbal agreement morphology.*

Abstract: What is ‘agreement’ morphology and what function does it serve in language systems? The prevalent conception of ‘agreement’ is one of an asymmetrical syntactic relation between the two elements. One element *controls* the realization of the other (the *target*). This view has led to a number of well-documented issues in the modeling of ‘agreement’ relations. The domain of the controller-target relation between two syntactic elements can be difficult to define (Boeckx, 2006; Corbett, 2006), controllers can be underspecified for features ‘triggered’ on the targets (Barlow, 1992; Frajzyngier, 1985) and sometimes the features of target and controller fail to match entirely (Corbett, 2006).

Despite these issues, ‘agreement’ has steadily gained prominence in formal models of grammar. The role of abstract functional heads such as AGR(eement) in Minimalism is now central to the mediation of movement. Unification-based approaches often incorporate AGR features to constrain unification. It will be argued here that the analytic issues discussed above are the result of the *a priori* assumption that ‘agreement’ is an asymmetric syntactic relation, rather than being the result of limitations inherent in the formal models themselves. It is this assumption that leads to the oft arrived at conclusion that agreement morphology is redundant.

A small number of researchers (Barlow, 1992; Frajzyngier, 1985; Reid, 1984) have rejected this view of agreement. Instead of accepting the claim that verbal agreement morphology is redundant, these analysts have posited functionality. Instead of viewing ‘agreement’ as an asymmetric syntactic relation, they view the morphology as independent coding means; *i.e.* the elements traditionally considered to be *targets* are in fact functionally independent of any *controller*. They are *compatible* with the *controllers*, not triggered by them.

Analyzing how ‘agreement’ relations are modeled, and considering how functions of morphology traditionally termed ‘agreement’ can be handled while rejecting the assumption that they are a symptom of asymmetric syntactic relations, brings to light two important gaps in formal models from the point of view of the descriptive grammarian. First, formal models such as LFG and Minimalism fail to make certain ‘emic’ elements of an utterance explicit; *e.g.* the syntactic effect of tone retraction in Chichewa and more generally the use of linear order as a coding means in a language. This opens the question as to whether or not they satisfy the criteria of ‘descriptive adequacy’. Secondly, such formal models do not provide a methodology for discovering and determining the scope of grammatical functions coded in particular languages. Because of this gap, ruling out alternative hypotheses to controller-target relations can’t be done by testing the alternative hypotheses on an empirical basis. Alternative hypotheses must be tested via distributional patterns based on theory-internal motivations. In contrast, the *Systems Interaction* framework (Frajzyngier & Shay, 2003) provides such a methodology and it follows from the principles of the framework that subject-verb agreement would indeed have functionality in the language system.

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