

One plus one make(s) what?

Determinants of agreement in German NP+NP coordination. A diachronic approach

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This talk explores conjoined noun phrases, a structural agreement conflict considered “important for understanding agreement” (Corbett 2006:238), from a diachronic point of view. I shall present a case study of change in verbal agreement with coordinated NPs in German, based on qualitative and quantitative analyses of ENHG and younger (18th-19th ct.) texts, which can be compared to data from MHG (Reiten 1964) and NHG (Findreng 1976). Examples such as (1) are quite frequent in MHG and ENHG: The verb preceding two singular NPs in subject function agrees in the singular. The latter may occur even if one of the NPs has plural value (2).

(1) ENHG (Luther’s Bible 1545)

Da nam Sem vnd Japheth ein Kleid / vnd legten es auff jre beide Schulter.
there **took-3SG** Sem and Japheth a gown / and **laid-3PL** it on **POSS-PL** both sholder

(2) ENHG (Luther’s Bible 1545)

*Wo her **komp-t** diesem solche Weisheit vnd Thatten?*
*where from **come-3SG** DEM-DAT.SG.M such-NOM.SG.F/PL.F. wisdom-SG and deed-PL*

Word order is a main factor determining agreement: In Luther’s Bible, singular verb dominates clearly (approx. 90%) in those cases where the target-verb precedes the conjoined NPs (VS). This can be analysed either as partial agreement with the conjunct next to the verb, or as a default singular. In those cases where the controlling NPs precede the verb (SV), plural verb increases up to approx. 50%. This sensitivity to word order has parallels e.g. in Biblical Hebrew¹ (Levi 1987:46-53), Arabic, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, and Old Norse (cf. Johannessen 1998).

The second decisive factor is animacy/individuation/definiteness of the controllers, which favour plural verb in the order: personal names > persons > concrete objects > abstract notions > nominalizations (see Corbett 2006:271-273 for a parallel in Russian). Diachronically, plural agreement increases for both word orders, following the animacy hierarchy and obliterating the word order effect for animate and concrete nouns; only abstract nouns still lack behind (Findreng 1976, non fictional texts).

I shall discuss a scenario modelling the changes, which involves the grammaticalization of former conceptual plural agreement, fitting into Behaghel’s (1928:2) hypothesis of increasing grammatical agreement in German. To account for the word order effect in

¹ Thus, for bible translations, one has to watch out for Hebrew influence. However, the pattern occurs throughout, also in non-translational text types.

MHG and ENHG, I consider a discourse pragmatic solution, lack of establishment as a topic (Wehr 1985), and a cognitive solution, local vs. global agreement conflicts (Burkhardt et al. 2007). Both solutions rely on the (in)transitivity (and actional semantics) of the verb.

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