

Workshop - Agreement from a diachronic perspective

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Abstract: Challenging monotonicity

This paper examines the gaps that can be found in synchronic accounts of agreement systems. The Agreement Hierarchy claims that the likelihood of semantic agreement increases monotonically from right to left in the figure below:

attributive < predicate < relative pronoun < personal pronoun

In some languages, not all positions are filled and the hierarchy is said to simply not apply for that slot.

This seems unproblematic in examples like the Swedish relative pronoun *som* (lit. ‘as’) that does not mark gender at all. Already in runic inscriptions, the comparative particle *sum* (today *som*) was used.¹ But the situation is not as straightforward when it comes to targets that gradually lose their ability to mark gender or when new agreement patterns enter the system. The latter was the case in Middle Swedish when translations from Latin introduced the use of the inflecting interrogative pronoun *vilken/vilket* ‘which’ as a relative pronoun.

Another example of a new ‘irregular’ agreement pattern is the Proto-Germanic consonantal adjective declension that catapulted a semantically based gender distinction straight into the attributive and predicative position (Jobin 2011). A trace of this semantic origin is an optional marker for males on adjectives in Modern Swedish. An example for the opposite development, that is isolated loss, are the uninflected forms of predicative adjectives in German. Today’s clean gap is preceded by centuries of inconsistent use of gender markers (Fleischer 2007).

Given the monotonicity claim is valid for every synchronic stage of a language, no single target would be able to change its degree of semanticity in isolation. This would be a heavy restriction on language change since it implies that agreement systems can only undergo major changes *in toto* or introduce semantic distinctions strictly from right to left. I would like to call this the *strong* version of monotonicity.

This does not rhyme well with the fact “that grammatical distinctions tend to develop by the gradual change of *individual* lexical morphemes, words and phrases into grammatical markers or constructions.” (Dahl 2000:589, my emphasis). Which is exactly what happened in the examples from Germanic and Old Middle Swedish.

But instead of discarding the AH as a whole I will present a *weaker* version with a more fine grain analysis of the respective gender systems, dividing them into different layers or sub-systems that each grammaticalise at their own pace. While the overlapping layers may lead to apparent irregularities in the overall system, each sub-system is shown to follow a regular path.

References

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¹ There is no evidence for the use of the PIE *k^wi-/*k^wo- in Gothic either (Luján 2009).