

Evading agreement: a new perspective on low nominative agreement in Icelandic

Nominative object agreement in Icelandic is well-known to be restricted to number agreement with 3rd person nominatives; non-3rd person nominatives are simply ungrammatical with any agreement. This pattern obtains even when the non-nominative subject does not intervene between the verb and the nominative object in the surface string:

- (1) *Henni líkaðir/líkaði þú.
her.DAT liked.2.SG/3SG you.NOM
'She liked you.'

This has been accounted for in terms of DEFECTIVE INTERVENTION: the ϕ -features of the dative argument cannot value the probing features of the verb, but nevertheless prevent it probing further. However, this is not enough to explain the ungrammaticality of (1)—“default” 3rd person agreement on the verb should still be available, just as it is in contexts such as (2), when the low nominative is not an argument of the agreeing verb, but originates in a small clause (Sigurðsson 2000, Schütze 2003). Hence it has been proposed that 1st/2nd person pronouns require licensing by entering into an agreement relation specifically with a Person probe, as motivated for the PCC in other languages (see discussion in Preminger 2011). However, this still does not account for the availability of (2), as the 2sg low nominative does not agree with the main verb. Therefore (2) should be as bad as (1), but it is not.

- (2) Henni *þóttir/þótti þú vera dugleg.
her.DAT thought.*2.SG/3SG you.NOM be.INF industrious
'She thought that you were industrious.'

The alternative “multiple agreement” approach first advanced in Schütze 2003 does not involve any special licensing requirement for 1st/2nd person pronouns; rather the ungrammaticality of (1) is attributed to a conflict in the morphological spell-out of agreement features. That is, the finite verb attempts to agree simultaneously with the dative (which by hypothesis results in 3rd person agreement) and the nominative argument, but the result is only grammatical if there is a morphological form that can spell-out the resulting feature combination. This is supported by the observation from Sigurðsson 1996 that where there is SYNCRETISM between 3rd singular and 1st/2nd person, the result is acceptable to many speakers:

- (3) *Henni leiddumst/leiddist við. b. Henni leiddist ég/þú.
her.DAT bored.1.PL/3.SG we.NOM her.DAT bored.1/2/3.SG I.NOM/you.S.NOM
'She found us boring.' 'She found me/you boring.'

In this talk, we add an additional case to the paradigm of agreement with low nominatives, the case of SPECIFICATIONAL COPULAR CLAUSES (=SCCs) as illustrated in (4). We present new evidence from two production experiments on Icelandic in favour of this 2nd approach to nominative object agreement in Icelandic, and in particular evidence against a special licensing requirement for 1st/2nd person pronouns.

First, SCCs involve two nominatives, the second of which is in some low position within vP. DP1 precedes T, but it does not appear in first position as a result of V2 topicalization: this order is fully available in the class of subordinate clauses where topicalization is excluded, e.g. embedded interrogatives.

Second, we have established that the low nominative can be a 2nd person pronoun (we expect that 1st person will work in the same way, but the experimental design dictated that we tested only 2nd person). Speakers vary as to whether they allow agreement with DP1 or DP2 (independent of person and number features of DP2). Importantly, it is possible for a number of speakers that the verb does not agree with DP2 even when it is 1st/2nd person. Hence we have another case where a low 1st/2nd person nominative can appear without being licensed by person agreement, supporting Schütze’s approach.

- (4) Hann var að velta fyrir sér hvort aðalvandamálið væri þið.
 he was wondering if main problem.def was.3.S you.PL.NOM
 ‘He was wondering whether the main problem was you.’

This paradigm however shows some interesting new patterns which shed further light on the process of agreement when there are multiple potential goals for agreement (two nominatives in the case of SCCs). For one, when speakers opt not to have the verb agree with the lower nominative, the result is not necessarily default (3rd person singular) agreement: if the initial DP is plural, the verb has to be plural:

- (5) Hann var að velta fyrir sér hvort líklegustu sigurvegararnir *væri/væru þið.
 He was wondering if most likely winners.DEF *was.3S/were3.PL you.PL.NOM
 ‘He was wondering whether the most likely winners were you.pl.’

In a second contrast to the Dat/Nom cases, some speakers choose rather to agree with the lower nominative even when there is no 2nd/3rd syncretism.

- (6) Hann var að velta fyrir sér hvort aðalvandamálið {værir þú/væruð þið}.
 he was wondering if main problem.def {was.2.S you.S.NOM/were.2.PL you.PL.NOM}
 ‘He was wondering whether the main problem was you.sg/pl.’

Under the “defective intervention” approach to constraints on low nominative licensing in Icelandic, one might seek to explain these contrasts between Dat/Nom constructions like (1) on the one hand and copular constructions like (6) on the other by postulating that the initial DPs in the latter case carry Number but crucially not Person features, and invoking Probes that are (for some speakers, some of the time) relativised to Person and to Plural (along the lines of Béjar and Kahnemuyipour 2014). This would however still leave mysterious the ungrammaticality of (1) with default agreement. We argue instead that copular clauses as in (4)–(6) involve movement of the (ultimately) initial DP from a lower position within the small clause. We postulate that while movement may take place via an intermediate landing site below T (resulting in agreement with DP1, as exhibited by some speakers), it is also possible for the initially lower DP to move directly to a position above the agreeing head, and therefore not to participate in agreement with T at all, resulting in full agreement with DP2. Thus, the probe fully agrees with the first DP it encounters. For the cases in (1) we suggest, in the spirit of Schütze 2003, but departing slightly from his proposal, that what is “defective” about dative intervenors is that while they do in fact trigger agreement (3rd singular) they do not terminate the probe’s search. This results in double agreement, which cannot be resolved morphologically in (1), and it results in default in (2) as the low nominative is not accessible in the small clause. In copular clauses like (4), on the other hand, DP2 is accessible due to phase extension, see den Dikken 2007.

The hypothesis put forward for independent reasons in Sigurðsson and Holmberg (2008) that there may be distinct person and number heads in Icelandic also allows us to explain a surprising pattern that we have documented when the initial DP is 3rd singular and the second 2nd plural, namely that around 1/3 of the time speakers choose a form that shows number but not person agreement with the second DP, a pattern that we do not see any way to account for under an account relying only on relativized probing.

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