

Strict negative concord in Russian and the directionality of Agree

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Most contemporary theories of agreement are unanimous in postulating elements that are defective in particular features and have to acquire the values for those features in the course of the syntactic computation ('Probes', Chomsky 2000), and elements providing values for those features by virtue of being inherently specified with them ('Goals', Chomsky 2000). It is also fairly uncontroversial that Probes and Goals must be in a c-command relationship for the features of the Goal to value the matching features of the Probe. Things get more controversial when it comes to specifying the directionality of featural operations: while Probes must c-command Goals in the classical conception of Agree (Chomsky 2000 i.a.), it is Goals that must c-command probes for Agree to obtain (Zeijlstra 2004 i.a.). Another source of controversy involves featural oppositions: while the classical conception of Agree views 'valued' vs. 'unvalued' as the only necessary opposition, Upward Agree requires an additional opposition -- 'interpretable' vs. 'uninterpretable' -- to approach the basic level of descriptive adequacy when it comes to modelling predicate-argument agreement (Bjorkman & Zeijlstra 2019). The main argument for Upward Agree is the existence of phenomena in which Goals do appear to c-command goals: anaphor binding, where featurally deficient anaphors require c-commanding antecedents, or negative concord, where n-pronouns must be licensed by a c-commanding sentential negation operator.

Proponents of classical Agree thus face a dilemma when confronted with phenomena like negative concord: they must either view such phenomena as lying outside the purview of syntax altogether or rethink these phenomena in such a way as to make them compatible with the Probes-must-c-command-Goals view. In this paper, I attempt to do the latter by providing an argument from colloquial Russian that favours the classical conception of Agree over Upwards Agree. The argument is based on the interaction of negative-concord licensing and (long-distance) scrambling: I show that scrambling helps circumvent the locality restrictions imposed on negative concord but only if the final landing site c-commands the marker of sentential negation. If strict negative concord is to be modelled syntactically, it is classical Agree that has the upper hand.

References

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