Constraints on coordinated subject agreement in isiXhosa and beyond

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The Question

How do conjoined subjects do noun class agreement?

Background

- Xhosa verbs normally agree with subjects for noun class
- Conjoined subjects don’t have one obvious noun class feature
- How does a verb agree with two different feature bundles?

Key points

- Singular conjuncts: A default agreement marker is used.
  The choice of default depends on semantic [+Human]ness of conjuncts
- Plural conjuncts: Agreement with the closest conjunct overrides [+Human] specification
  → The choice of agreement marking depends on number, order, and animacy
  → Our analysis handles this choice in an Optimality Theoretic system

Basic assumptions

The subject markers and their features

Features: Number, noun class (1-11), Humanness (+H, -H, undesignated)

Conjoining singulars

[+Human] → ba-
1. A-iwa-bi nen-i-xhosa ba-sa-funda
2. A-puru nom-ibhulu l-e-ni
3. A-soman-isa-bi
4. A-iwa-bi
5. A-soman-isa-bi
6. A-iwa-bi

Mixed [+Human] → ba-
(a) A-iwa-bi xeni-xhosa ba-se kithi-ni
(b) L-sbona nom-vaalda ba-timele
(c) L-sbona nom-vaalda ba-timele

Conjoining plurals

Closest Conjunct Agreement

[+Human] → zi-
1. A-soman-isa-bi
2. A-puru nom-ibhulu l-e
3. A-soman-isa-bi
4. A-iwa-bi
5. A-soman-isa-bi

Generalizations

→ Number resolution. Conjuncting singulars always yields plural agreement
→ Defaulting: conjuncting singulars only yields ba- (SM2) or zi- (SM5/10), no matter what class the conjuncts are

Mixed number conjuncts

Sg & Pl → Agree closest
1. A-bi-wetha nen-si-denje ga-ja-bwa
2. A-soman-isa-bi
3. A-bi-wetha nen-si-denje ga-ja-bwa

Pl & Sg → Agree furthest
1. A-soman-isa-bi
2. A-bi-wetha nen-si-denje ga-ja-bwa
3. A-soman-isa-bi

Generalizations

→ Partial agreement. Agreement is always controlled by the plural conjunct

And beyond

Other Bantu languages also have different defaults according to [+human] specification of conjuncts (e.g. Xitsonga (Mitchley 2015), Sesotho (De Vos & Mitchley 2012), Swahili (Marten 2000), Chichewa (Corbett & Mngezi 1987))

Some languages allow for agreement with the NC-feature only if both conjuncts bear the same plural NC-feature (e.g. Sesotho/De Vos & Mitchley 2012), Chichewa (Corbett & Mngezi 1987)

Swahili (Marten 2000) allows closest conjunct agreement with singular nouns too

Conclusions

- Xhosa prefers agreement with an NC-feature rather than agreement with a [+human] feature
- Except that number resolution precludes NC-agreement with conjunct singulars, and forces default agreement instead
- These generalizations can be captured using constraints addressing faithfulness to NC- and [+human]-features, as well as the markedness of singular agreement with a conjointed subject
- Different rankings of these constraints can account for different agreement resolution patterns found in other Bantu languages