

Remarks on omnivory and complementarity: a commentary on the paper by Andrew Nevins

Susana Béjar

Received: 1 September 2011 / Accepted: 1 October 2011 / Published online: 25 November 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

Abstract This commentary examines Nevins' Multiple Agree (MA) approach to complex agreement phenomena, and in particular the two patterns that Nevins identifies as omnivorous number and person complementarity. Nevins analyzes both as outcomes of the MA mechanism and attributes the categorical split between person and number to ontological differences in the feature inventories: person features are binary and fully specified, while number features are unary and underspecified. I argue that the opposition between person and number is strained insofar as there exist contexts where person, too, patterns as though it were underspecified, giving rise to the omnivorous agreement pattern. I also show that the MA mechanics do not fully predict that number agreement should be omnivorous across the board. Auxiliary assumptions restricting possible probe structures are required.

Keywords Complex agreement · Person agreement · Number agreement · Omnivorous agreement · Complementary agreement · Multiple Agree · Agreement restrictions · Phi-features · Underspecification

1 Introduction

In his contribution to this special issue, Andrew Nevins sets up a novel puzzle involving multiple-argument agreement contexts. In cases that look to be otherwise comparable, we find two strikingly different agreement patterns: (i) omnivorous number (ON), a permissive pattern that seems to permit simultaneous agreement with two arguments; and (ii) person complementarity (PC), a restrictive pattern which prohibits

S. Béjar (✉)

Department of Linguistics, University of Toronto, University of Toronto, Sidney Smith Hall,
4th Floor, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, ON M5S 3G3, Canada
e-mail: sbejar@chass.utoronto.ca