

Conditions on object agreement and pronominalisation – a corpus-based typological study

Stefan Schnell
University of Melbourne

Grammatical agreement is said to arise from free person markers, whereby free pronouns turn into agreement affixes, often through a stage of cliticization (Siewierska 2004; Lehmann 1995). It is typically assumed that this process is triggered by an increased use – or “overuse” – of free pronouns in particular syntactic and/or morphophonological environments (Bybee 2006; Bybee & Thompson 2006; Givon 1976), thereby leading to neutralisation of semantic or pragmatic saliency effects (see also Dalrymple & Nikiolaeva 2011). At the fully grammaticalised stage, agreement markers would be obligatory affixes on inflected verb forms that are used in any context, and thereby not be subject to any conditions.

The majority of languages in Siewierska’s (2013) sample on “verbal person marking” shows agreement for both A and P (with S usually aligning with A). Other studies, however, find that object agreement never quite reaches a proceeded stage of grammaticalisation (Siewierska 1999) that would come maximally close to “canonical” agreement (Corbett 2003a,b). This latter impression is confirmed by closer examination of the languages in Siewierska’s (2013) sample: typically, object agreement seems to be more widely conditioned by saliency features (animacy, definiteness), and more easily suspended under particular discourse conditions (focus, non-topical objects) (see also Iemmolo & Witzlack-Makarevich 2011).

I here compare these typological observations to findings of a cross-corpus study of object agreement and pronominalisation in seven languages (Haig & Schnell 2016). Some variation in details notwithstanding, initial findings suggest that object pronominalisation is either systematically conditioned in terms of animacy or discourse topicality (see Schnell & Haig 2014; Schnell & Barth in prep on Vera’a), or obligatory. Subject pronominalisation, on the other hand, is usually more prevalent generally, and to a much lesser degree subject to systematic conditioning.

This suggests that object agreement and pronominalisation are subject to broadly the same set of conditions across languages, and that the assumed reduction and fusion process of free to bound person markers applies to elements highly restricted in use. This would contrast with subjects where the process of formal reduction applies to elements already unconditioned in use at the stage of free, unbound person markers. If this scenario is roughly on the right track, my findings might call into question some of the scenarios of grammaticalisation that see formal and reduction and functional “bleaching” as going more or less hand in hand. Conversely, unrestrictedly – and thus maximally frequently – used (“overused”) person markers need not turn into bound agreement markers.

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