

Polysemy and Pancakes

The alternation between syntactic and semantic agreement is broadly regulated by the following *Agreement Marking Principle* (Wechsler and Hahm 2011; Wechsler to appear):

- (1) (a) Agreement is driven by a formal grammatical feature of the trigger, if the trigger has such a feature. (b) If the trigger lacks such a feature, then the target agreement inflection is semantically interpreted as characterizing the trigger denotation.

Examples: (i) Unmarked nouns: Most Serbian/Croatian common nouns have a formal gender feature, triggering formal agreement (by 1a); but *sudija* ‘judge’ lacks one, hence the target gender may be MASC or FEM, *correlating with the sex of the judge*, by 1b. (ii) Coordination (Farkas and Zec 1995, Wechsler 2008): French *sentinelle* ‘sentry’ triggers FEM regardless of the sentry’s sex (1a); but coordinate NPs are exocentric, hence lack a formal phi feature (unless it is distributive; cp. King and Dalrymple 2004), predicting semantic agreement (MASC for mixed sex): *La sentinelle et sa femme ont été pris/*prises en otage*. ‘The sentry[F] and his wife[F] were taken.M/ *taken.F.PL hostage.’ Hence, cross-linguistically the resolution of conjuncts of different genders is typically semantic, not syntactic (Corbett 2006, 259ff).

However, some NPs trigger semantic agreement despite having a head noun that is marked for the relevant phi feature, an apparent problem for 1a. This talk looks at Swedish ‘pancake sentences’ like 2b (Faarlund 1977, Enger 2004, Josefsson 2009):

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| <p>(2) a. [Pannkakor] är goda.
pancakes be.PRES good.PL
‘Pancakes are good.’</p> | <p>b. [Pannkakor] är gott.
pancakes be.PRES good.NT.SG
roughly, ‘Eating pancakes is good.’</p> |
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Assuming 1a, the bracketed NP in 2b must lack a syntactic plural number feature. Two hypotheses will be considered: (i) Phrasal Polysemy Hypothesis (PPH). A productive rule of *systematic polysemy* (Apresjan 1974) applies to the NP [*pannkakor*] to derive a variant referring to an activity or other situation involving pancakes (Copestake and Briscoe 1995); the rule does not assign a formal number feature to the output. (ii) Silent Head Hypothesis (SHH) (Faarlund 1977, Josefsson 2009). The NP has a branching structure with a silent head unmarked for the phi features, viz [ATT ÄTA pannkakor]_{VP} ‘to eat pancakes’, with silent ATT ÄTA, or silent light verb. We argue for PPH.

Evidence for PPH and against SHH: singular-triggering (event-denoting) *pannkakor* ‘pancakes’ always has the syntactic distribution of an NP, never a VP or infinitive phrase. Syntactic contexts that allow infinitives but disallow nominals uniformly reject *pannkakor*: pseudocomplements (3b); and complements of certain verbs (4a), adjectives (4b), and nouns (4c).

- (3) a. Att äta pannkakor är gott.
to eat pancakes is good.NT.SG
‘Eating pancakes is good.’

- b. Det är gott {[att äta pannkakor]/ *pannkakor}
 it is good to eat pancakes pancakes
 ‘It is good to eat pancakes.’
- (4) a. Jag fortsatt {[att äta pannkakor] / *[pannkakor]}.
 I continued (to) eat pancakes pancakes
 ‘I continued to eat pancakes.’ / ‘*I continued pancakes.’
- b. Jag är villig {[att äta pannkakor]/ *[pannkakor]}.
 I am willing to eat pancakes pancakes
 ‘I am willing to eat pancakes.’ / ‘*I am willing pancakes.’
- c. Jag har lust {[att äta pannkakor]/ *[pannkakor]}.
 I have desire to eat pancakes pancakes
 ‘I want to eat pancakes.’
 (lit. I have desire to eat pancakes./ *I have desire pancakes.)
- (5) Det är gott med {*[att äta pannkakor]/ [pannkakor]}.
 it is good with to eat pancakes / pancakes
 roughly, ‘Eating pancakes is nice.’

The contrasts in 3-5 are unexpected if *pannkakor* can be a covert infinitive. Hellan (1986:96) notes another problem for SHH: the putative source 6b is infelicitous:

- (6) a. Vodka er sunt å drikke. (Norwegian)
 vodka[MASC] is healthy.NT.SG to drink
 ‘Vodka is healthy to drink.’
- b. *Å drikke vodka er sunt å drikke.
 (‘To drink vodka is healthy to drink.’)

Josefsson (2009, 43), arguing for SHH, notes that pancake-NPs can contain reflexive pronouns which, she suggests, are bound by the PRO subject of a silent ‘light verb’: [*hemfärd till USA utan **sin** dotter*] ‘hometravel to USA without **self**’s daughter’. But such reflexives can also be bound within NPs in Swedish, by genitives or by implicit agents, so these data do not favor either hypothesis.

Either hypothesis allows us to preserve 1a. Alternatively, 1a may be replaced by a Bayesian version in which the syntactic and semantic features are allowed to compete probabilistically (Pearl 1988, 49ff; Kjaerulff and Madsen 2007, 25ff).

Selected References: Copestake, A., and T. Briscoe. 1995. Semi-productive Polysemy and Sense Extension. *J of Sem* 12, no. 1: 15. • Enger, H-O. 2004. Scandinavian pancake sentences as semantic agreement. *Nordic J of Ling* 27, no. 01: 5-34. • Faarlund, J.T. 1977. Embedded clause reduction and Scandinavian gender agreement. *J of L*: 239-257. • Josefsson, G. 2009. Peas and Pancakes: On apparent disagreement and (null) light verbs in Swedish. *Nordic J of Ling* 32, no. 01: 35-72. • Wechsler, S. (in press). ‘Mixed Agreement, the Person Feature, and the Index/Concord Distinction.’ *NLLT*. • Wechsler, S. and H.-J. Hahm 2011. ‘Number Markedness and Polite Plurals’. *Morphology* 21:247–281.