

Why are the Lazy so Agreeable?

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0. Introduction

Serbo-Croatian allows a pronoun to show either grammatical or semantic agreement with its antecedent. That is, a pronoun may share the formal features of its antecedent, or it may display features according to its intended referent. But there is a puzzling exception: ‘genuine pronouns of laziness’ (Geach 1962, Evans 1977), also called ‘paycheck pronouns’, permit only grammatical agreement. Why?

1. Pronouns of Laziness

Pronouns typically make reference to previous linguistic material in the discourse, using a variety of construal modes, including coreference, bound-variable interpretations, ‘donkey’ anaphora, and so on. The pronouns Evans 1977 called ‘genuine pronouns of laziness’, later called ‘paycheck pronouns’, are not coreferential but can usually be interpreted by substituting the antecedent noun phrase for the pronoun. Some examples follow (examples based on Karttunen 1969, Cooper 1979):

1. a. The woman who gave *her paycheck* to her daughter was wiser than the woman who used *it* to bail her husband out of jail.
- b. John spent *his paycheck* on beer. Everyone else put *it* in the bank.

On the relevant (and most plausible) readings of the sentences in (1), the pronoun *it* does not corefer with its italicized antecedent. But substituting the antecedent for the pronoun yields a sentence with the relevant reading, where the possessive pronoun is bound by its local subject.

2. Serbo-Croatian pronoun agreement

Serbo-Croatian has several types of agreement: within a nominal, determiners and adjectives agree in gender, number and case with the head noun; a nominative subject NP triggers person and number agreement on finite auxiliaries and finite verbs, and triggers number and gender agreement on participles; and pronouns agree in person, number, and gender with their antecedents. Each of these types is illustrated in (2) below. Wechsler and Zlatić (1997, 2003) argue that nouns have two grammatical agreement feature sets: ‘Concord’ features that are grammaticalizations of declension features; and ‘Index’ features that are grammaticalizations of semantic features. NP-internal modifiers (determiners and adjectives) show *concord* with the head noun; finite verbal elements (auxiliaries and verbs) show *index agreement* with the subject; pronouns show *index agreement* with their antecedents. Among our evidence for this split is the mixed agreement with certain collective nouns such as *deca* ‘children’ (as in example 2), *braća* ‘brothers’, *gospoda* ‘gentlemen’, *vlastela* ‘landowners’. Modifiers of such nouns are feminine singular while finite verbs and pronouns show neuter plural agreement, the latter illustrated by the continuation of sentence 2 shown in (i).

In addition to the two sets of grammatical agreement features, an NP or pronoun denotation can have semantic features such as ‘male’ and ‘female’. Masculine plural is the default form for pronouns referring to collections of mixed or unknown sex or gender. When the antecedent of a pronoun is *deca* ‘children’, we find variation between neuter plural and masculine plural:

2. Posmatrali smo ovu dobru decu.
 watched.1.PL AUX this.F.SG good.F.SG children.ACC

(i) Ona_i su se lepo igrala.
 they.NT.PL AUX.3.PL REFL nicely played.NT.PL

(ii) Oni_i su se lepo igrali.
 they-M.PL AUX.3.PL REFL nicely played-M.PL

‘We watched these good children_i. They_i played well.’

Summarizing, the neuter plural pronoun in (i) registers the grammatical (‘Index’) person, number, and gender features of the antecedent noun *deca* ‘children’, while the masculine plural pronoun in (ii) registers the semantic features of the antecedent.

Wechsler and Zlatić (1998, 2003) explored the question of how this alternation between grammatical and semantic agreement on pronouns is affected by the mode of pronoun construal: coreference, bound variable, e-type, paycheck, etc. Our results are as follows.

A coreferential pronoun in a separate sentence from its antecedent alternates between grammatical and semantic agreement, as shown already in (2). However, if the antecedent is in the same sentence, semantic agreement is strongly preferred, as shown in the variant of 3 without *svako* ‘every’. This example uses the neuter diminutive *devojčice* ‘girl’. Similarly, with pronouns whose antecedents are quantifiers like *every girl*, which are interpreted as variables bound by the antecedent quantifier, semantic agreement is strongly preferred:

3. a. (Svako) devojčice_i misli da je_i/*ga_i Jovan voli.
 every.NOM.NT.SG girl.NT.SG thinks that PRON.ACC.SG.F/*NT John likes
 ‘Every/The girl thinks that John loves her.’

b. Jovan je rekao (svakom) devojčetu da je_i/*ga_i voli.
 John AUX told every girl.DAT.NT.SG that PRON.ACC.SG.F/*NT likes
 ‘John told every/the girl that he loves her.’

As shown by this example, semantic gender is observed regardless of whether the antecedent is the subject (3a) or object (3b) and regardless of whether it is a definite NP (*devojčice* ‘the girl’) or a quantifier (*svako devojčice* ‘every girl’).

Reflexive pronouns are split: those with nominative case antecedents require index agreement, while those with non-nominative antecedents require semantic agreement. Whether the antecedent is a quantifier or referential NP does not appear to affect this pattern:

4. a. (Svako) devojčice je volelo samo/?*samu sebe.
 every.NT.SG girl.NOM.NT.SG AUX liked.NT.SG own.ACC.NT.SG/?*.ACC.F.SG self.ACC
 ‘Every/The girl liked herself.’

b. (Svakom) devojčetu je bilo žao same/*samog sebe.
 every.DAT.NT.SG girl.DAT.NT.SG AUX be.NT.SG sorry own.GEN.F.SG/*NT.SG self
 ‘Every/The girl felt pity for herself.’

Next we turn to ‘E-type’ or ‘donkey’ pronouns, pronouns that have a quantifier as antecedent, but are not semantically bound by that quantifier, at least under some analyses (see Geach 1962,

Evans 1977, 1980). Serbian/Croatian donkey pronouns allow either index or pragmatic agreement:

5. a. Svaki čovekkoji ima decu misli da su ona najpametnija.
every man who has children thinks that AUX.3PL they.NT.PL smartest.NT.PL
- b. Svaki čovekkoji ima decu misli da su oni najpametniji.
every man who has children thinks that AUX.3PL they.M.PL smartest.M.PL
'Every man who has children_i thinks they_i are the smartest.'

As shown here, either neuter plural or masculine plural is permitted.

To summarize: Semantic versus grammatical agreement depends on locality and other factors, but not on the mode of construal. Certain local domains seem to favor semantic agreement for ordinary pronouns, while grammatical agreement is required for nominative-bound reflexives. Outside of the local domain, pronouns alternate. These patterns appear to be orthogonal to the construal process such as bound variable, e-type, and coreference.

With that as background, let us now consider paycheck pronouns:

6. Otac koji je insistirao da mu deca idu na studije AUX was smarter from
father who AUX insisted that his children go to college je bio pametniji od
onog oca koji je insistirao da se ona/oni odmah zaposle.
that father who AUX insisted that se they.NT.PL/they.M.PL immediately employed

'The father who insisted that *his children* go to college was smarter than the father who insisted that *they* immediately get a job.'

ona (they.NT.PL) => strict or sloppy reading
oni (they.M.PL) => ONLY strict reading

Interestingly, in order to yield the pragmatically plausible 'sloppy' interpretation, the pronoun must appear in neuter plural form, showing grammatical agreement with the antecedent *mu deca* 'his children'. The masculine plural pronoun forces the rather implausible 'strict' reading in which the second (less smart) father has the audacity to insist that the children of the first (smarter) father get a job. This judgment has been confirmed by several native speakers.

Why do pronouns of laziness require grammatical agreement? We do not know the answer, but we made some comments that may point towards one (Wechsler and Zlatić 2003:212ff). A paycheck pronoun is interpreted exactly as if it were replaced with a copy (or near-copy) of its antecedent NP— it is a 'lazy' pronunciation of a full NP. (This stands in contrast to other types of construal, cp. 'Every girl thinks that John loves her' ≠ 'Every girl thinks that John loves every girl'.) Perhaps paycheck pronouns substitute for full NPs under a condition of formal consistency, i.e. the grammatical features must match. Why should there be such a condition for laziness/paycheck pronouns? If Manfred can solve this puzzle, he will simultaneously earn his paycheck and reward my laziness.

References

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