

Person agreement with coordinated subjects in Russian

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Abstract

The paper deals with person agreement with a coordinate subject containing a personal pronoun. An experimental study was conducted to assess the acceptability of various agreement strategies based on factors such as word order, position of conjuncts, and characteristics of a predicate (unergative / unaccusative predicates). The results of the experiments indicated three possible agreement strategies with coordinate subjects containing a personal pronoun: resolved agreement, closest conjunct agreement, and default 3rd plural agreement. The choice of these strategies was found to be influenced by word order and positions of conjuncts, while the argument structure showed no significant impact on the acceptability of agreement strategies.

Keywords: person agreement, coordinated subjects, person hierarchy, word order

Introduction

This article addresses predicate agreement with a coordinated subject, where one of the conjuncts is a personal pronoun, in the Russian language. The study focuses on subjects of the form *ya i X* 'I and X' and *X i ya* 'X and I', where X is a masculine proper name. Normative Russian grammars, such as (Shvedova et al. 1980: 243–244), emphasize the person hierarchy when dealing with a coordinated subject. If the 1st person pronoun is part of the coordinated subject, the agreement will be in the 1st person; if it's a 2nd person pronoun, the agreement will be in the 2nd person. When coordinating the 1st person and 2nd person pronouns, grammatical agreement is based on the 1st person. However, the person hierarchy of person in Russian can be violated. An obvious case of this possibility is represented by constructions with the VS word order, where it becomes possible to agree with the closest conjunct regardless of its person feature (Pekelis 2013). Moreover, I have found examples of the 3rd person plural agreement in several sentences from the National Corpus of the Russian Language. Experimental methods appear promising for studying predicate agreement with a coordinated subject, as they allow for the conduct of factor analysis of the acceptability and distribution of various agreement options.

Experimental study

The research comprises two experiments. In the first experiment, the coordinated subject had the form of *ya i X* ‘I and X’ (X being a proper masculine name), with a variation in the order of the subject and the predicate (1a–b). In the second experiment, I fixed the order of the subject and the predicate, using the word order VS, while changing the order of the conjuncts (2a–b). Additionally, in the second experiment I used both unergative and unaccusative predicates, as the impact of the argument structure on the possibility of the closest conjunct agreement has been discussed in several studies, e.g. (Babyonyshev 1996; Glushan 2013). All experiments included grammatical and ungrammatical fillers, with a ratio of 1:1 to the experimental sentences. Data analysis involved statistical methods such as ANOVA, regression analysis using mixed linear models, and multiple pairwise Tukey comparisons. There were approximately 80 participants for each experiment.

- (1) a. [*ya i X*] Verb PrepP
 b. PrepP Verb [*ya i X*]
- (2) a. PrepP Verb [*ya i X*]
 b. PrepP Verb [*X i ya*]

Figure 1 shows the results of the first experiment in the form of an interaction plot. The highest rating is given to the 1st person plural agreement; however, it is influenced by word order, showing a significant decrease in VS word order ($p < 0.05$). In the VS word order, the 1st person singular agreement also receives relatively high ratings; nevertheless, its ratings are significantly lower than those for the 1st person plural agreement ($p = 0.01$). Ratings for the closest conjunct agreement in the SV word order, as well as for 3rd person singular agreement in both word orders, do not significantly differ from ratings for ungrammatical fillers. Notably, ratings for 3rd person plural agreement in the SV word order significantly differ from ratings for 3rd person singular agreement ($p < 0.05$).

The results of the second experiment are illustrated in Figure 2. In the ‘I and X’ conjunct order, the highest ratings were given to the 1st person plural agreement and 1st person singular agreement, with no significant difference ($p = 0.98$). In the ‘X and I’ order, the 1st person plural agreement received the highest rating. For 1st person plural agreement, the conjunct order factor is significant: in the ‘X and I’ order, such agreement is significantly lower. The word order factor is also significant for the closest conjunct agreement: in the ‘I and X’ order, it is rated higher than in the ‘X and I’ order. Thus, it can be concluded that the personal pronoun *ya* ‘I’ is a stronger attractor in the role of agreement controller compared to a proper name. Interestingly, in the ‘X and I’ word order, ratings for the 3rd person plural agreement do not significantly

differ from ratings for agreement with the first conjunct ($p = 0.40$). Ratings for 3rd person plural agreement are significantly higher than ratings for the furthest conjunct agreement. The argument structure of the predicate (whether it is unergative or unaccusative) turned out to be insignificant.

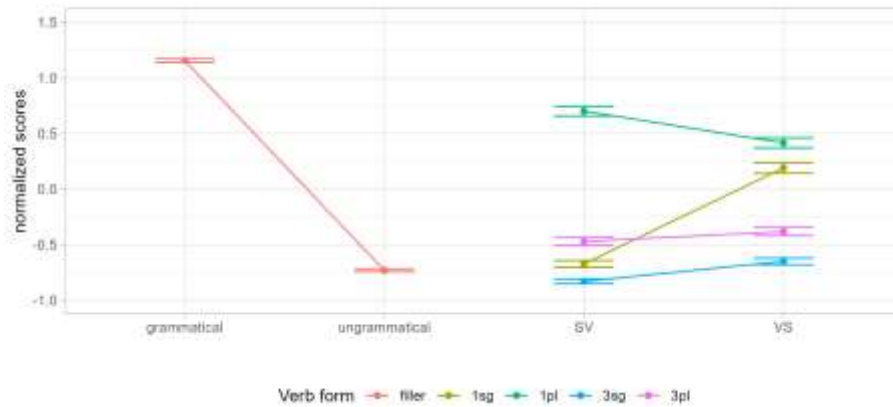


Figure 1. Normalized ratings for the first experiment.

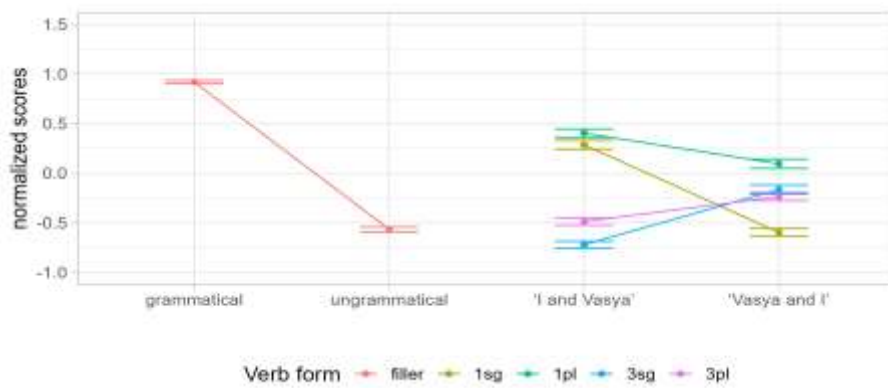


Figure 2. Normalized ratings for the second experiment.

Conclusion

According to the experiment results, in the Russian language, when the conjuncts do not match in person, three agreement strategies are possible: resolved agreement, the closest conjunct agreement in the VS word order, and 3rd person plural agreement (the latter is somewhat marginal but is still rated

higher than ungrammatical fillers in some cases, and examples of such agreement can be found in the corpus). The last conjunct agreement in such constructions can be considered ungrammatical. Interestingly, the closest conjunct agreement in the VS word order is rated approximately at the same level as the resolved agreement. In a typological study by A. Nevins and P. Weisser (2019) on the closest conjunct agreement, an empirical generalization was made that different features trigger agreement with only one conjunct with varying probabilities, and it was shown that the person feature less frequently induces the closest conjunct agreement compared to other features. My findings regarding the closest conjunct agreement in the VS word order somewhat contradict this generalization. The 3rd person plural agreement is also intriguing, and the mechanism of its occurrence is yet to be modeled. It is necessary to emphasize that this agreement appeared even in cases when none of the conjuncts was in the 3rd person (Belova 2022).

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