

The meaning of agreement

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The phenomenon known as “grammatical agreement” has long been seen as confirming the existence of arbitrary syntax. Although linguists differ in their definitions, most would define agreement as a situation in which the grammatical form of one element in a sentence (the “target”, in the terminology of Corbett 1991; 2006) is dependent on morphosyntactic or semantic features of another element (the “controller” or “trigger”). The following assumptions recur regularly in definitions of agreement:

- a. *feature-matching*: the relevant features of the “controller” and “target” must match;
- b. *directionality*: the grammatical properties of the target are determined by those of the controller and not vice versa;
- c. *redundancy*: agreement morphology contributes no independent semantic content to the message being communicated.

Directionality is related to redundancy in that the formal marking of the target is treated as entirely predictable from the properties of its controller. This conforms with the information-theoretic view, prevalent in linguistics, that lack of choice equals lack of informativeness.

I will offer a critique of these traditional assumptions, and propose an alternative view from the perspective that language is a system of meaningful signs used by human beings to communicate messages. In this view, the location of arbitrariness in language is in the relation between signal and meaning. The distribution of linguistic forms is motivated by (a) the contribution their meanings make to the message being communicated; and (b) pragmatic factors such as ease of processing and social conventions that govern human interactions (see e.g. Contini-Morava 1995). From this perspective there is no point in trying to develop a general “theory of agreement” because the notion of “agreement” emerges from a conception of language in which some forms are regarded as meaningful, others not, and the distribution of linguistic forms need have no functional motivation. Instead I will illustrate how sign-based analysis can be applied to phenomena usually described in terms of “agreement”, focusing on my own work with noun class/gender in Swahili.

- Contini-Morava, Ellen. 1995. Introduction: On linguistic sign theory. In E. Contini-Morava and B.S. Goldberg (eds.), *Meaning as explanation: Advances in linguistic sign theory*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1-39.
- Corbett, Greville. 1991. *Gender*. Cambridge University Press.
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