Variability in Icelandic Agreement: An Interaction of DP Licensing and Multiple Agree

This paper provides an analysis of two phenomena involving post-verbal Nominatives in Icelandic. First, Icelandic restricts the person features of Nominative objects. As shown in (1a), 1st or 2nd person objects are not allowed. Second, agreement with 3rd person Nominative objects is optional, as shown in (1b).

her.Dat bored.3sg we.Nom.pl/you.Nom.pl her.Dat bored.3sg/3pl them.Nom.pl
‘She found us/you boring.’ ‘She found them boring.’

Previous analyses have attempted to account for the contrast between (1a) and (1b). Anagnostopoulou (2005) proposes that the person features of the Dative and the Nominative clash in (1a) as a result of Multiple Agree with T, while there is no such feature clash in (1b). Sigurðsson and Holmberg (2008) (henceforth S&H) propose that the Dative in (1a) necessarily intervenes when Person probing occurs, whereas the Dative in (1b) may or may not intervene when Number probing occurs. I argue that neither analysis adequately accounts for the facts in (1a/b) or for two additional facts. First, unlike Nominative objects bearing [1] or [2], embedded Nominative subjects bearing [1] or [2] are licensed. I argue that this asymmetry arises because [1]/[2] on a Nominative object cannot be checked while [1]/[2] on an embedded Nominative subject can be checked. Second, I contribute previously unreported data which illustrate that the rate of agreement with 3rd person post-verbal Nominatives depends on the type of construction. Based on the results of a survey of sixty-one native Icelandic speakers that I conducted, I argue that as the number of Agree relations between T and items intervening between T and the Nominative increases, the likelihood of T probing the Nominative decreases.

On Anagnostopoulou’s analysis, (1a) is ungrammatical because the Dative values Person to [default], as Datives do not trigger agreement, while the Nominative values Person to [1] or [2]. There is no feature clash in (1b) because 3rd person DPs lack a Person specification and also value Person to [default]. In addition to failing to account for the optionality in (1b), this analysis also predicts that constructions with embedded [1]/[2] Nominative subjects should be ungrammatical. However, as shown in (2a), these DPs are licensed, but they do not agree with the matrix verb. By contrast, 3rd person embedded Nominative subjects optionally agree, as shown in (2b).

(2) a. Honum mundi/*mundum virðast við (vera) hæfir.
   him.Dat would.3sg/*1pl seem we.Nom.pl (be) competent
   ‘We would seem competent to him.’

   b. Honum mundi/mundu virðast þeir (vera) hæfir.
   him.Dat would.3sg/3pl seem they.Nom.pl (be) competent
   ‘They would seem competent to him.’

On S&H’s analysis, it is not clear why default agreement is not allowed in (1a). On this account, when a Dative blocks Number probing, there is default agreement, as in (1b). Since S&H argue that the Dative blocks Person probing in (1a), we expect default agreement, not ungrammaticality. This account also predicts that (2a) should be ungrammatical, since the Dative presumably blocks Person probing, just as it does in (1a).

Following other researchers (Alexiadou 2003; S&H 2008; Taraldsen 1995), I propose a division between Person and Number features. DPs bearing [1] or [2] are licensed only when their Person feature is checked by T. While a closer Dative blocks Person probing for the purposes of DP licensing, a closer Dative may or may not block probing for the purposes of Number agreement. (1a) is ungrammatical because the Dative blocks Person checking, as shown in (3a). I argue that Person checking is related to Nominative case assignment and that Person
agreement is parasitic on an Agree relation in which Nominative is assigned. Since non-finite T in Icelandic assigns Nominative (Sigurðsson 1991), non-finite T also checks Person. Therefore, the Nominative in (2a) is licensed, as shown in (3b). Since finite T does not assign Nominative in (3b) the matrix verb cannot agree in (2a). Because the Nominatives in (1/2b) do not bear Person features, Person checking is not required for DP licensing.

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\text{(3) a. } *T \text{ Dat Nom}_1/2 = \text{(1a) b. } T_{[-\text{fin}]} \text{ Dat } [\text{IP} \ T_{[-\text{fin}]} \ Nom_1/2] = \text{(2a)}
\]

Like Anagnostopoulou, I argue for a Multiple Agree analysis. However, I derive the optionality in number agreement in (1/2b) from the optionality of Multiple Agree (Hiraiwa 2001). The default form results when T probes only the Dative, as in (4a). The agreeing form results when T probes both the Dative and the Nominative, as in (4b). Since Datives do not value features on T, there is no feature clash in (4b).

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\text{(4) a. } T \text{ Dat Nom } \text{ default } = \text{(1/2b) b. } T \text{ Dat Nom } \text{ agreement with Nom } = \text{(1/2b)}
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Crucially, the likelihood of T probing the Nominative depends on the number of Agree relations that must be established en route to the Nominative. Based on the aforementioned survey results, in constructions such as (1b), T probes the Nominative 47% of the time, while in constructions such as (2b) T probes the Nominative 36% of the time (p < .05). I argue that agreement diminishes in (2b) because there is an additional Agree relation not present in (1b). In order to probe the Nominative in (2b) T must also probe the complement clause, in addition to the Dative, since both are arguments of the matrix verb. The prediction that an increase in Agree relations results in a decrease in agreement is confirmed by the rate of agreement for the expletive counterpart to (2b). Agreement for constructions such as (5) is only 17%.

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\text{(5) } \text{ðað muni/mundu honum virðast þeir } (\text{vera} \text{hæfir)} \text{ there would.3sg/3pl him.Dat seem they.Nom.pl (be) competent ‘They would seem competent to him.’}
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I argue that the agreement rate for (5) provides evidence that T must probe the expletive – in addition to probing the Dative and the complement clause – in order to probe the Nominative. These findings suggest that while agreement with post-verbal Nominatives in Icelandic is optional, the rate of agreement is systematic and depends on the extent to which Multiple Agree applies.

REFERENCES