

Humans, animals, things and animacy features

In the Inari Saami verbal agreement system, subjects referring to animals optionally pattern with human subject or inanimate subjects. This paper proposes an analysis of verbal agreement in Inari Saami (based on Toivonen, 2007) and shows that what is arguably the simplest formal analysis of these data does not seem to be the most intuitive analysis from a more general linguistic perspective. We argue that formal analyses of linguistic phenomena involving animacy should focus first and foremost on capturing the data with minimal theoretical machinery. Intuitions about what forms natural animacy categories should be stated separately from the formal analysis.

Inari Saami finite verbs agree fully or partially with their subjects. In the full paradigm, verbs agree in three persons and three numbers (SG, DU, PL). In the partial paradigm, verbs agree only in two numbers: SG and PL. Human subjects fully agree with the verb, while inanimates trigger partial agreement. Animal (non-human animates) subjects can trigger either full or partial agreement. We focus here only on third person subjects.

- (1) Kyehti almaa kuá'lástava onne. 'Two men are fishing today.'
two man fish.3.DU today
- (2) Kyehti poccuu ruáttáin/ryettih meecist. 'Two reindeer ran in the forest.'
two reindeer ran.3.DU/ran3.PL forest.LOC
- (3) Kyehti stuorra keeđgi láá meecist. 'Two large rocks are in the forest.'
two large rock.PL are.3.PL forest.LOC

We will present a feature-based analysis of agreement. Let us assume that noun phrases and verbs come with certain features and they have to agree in order for the noun to appear as a subject of a verb. By agree, we mean 'not directly conflict': if a feature is not specified on the noun, it can agree with any verb as far as that feature is concerned. Features from subjects and verbs combine monotonically into feature structures: as information from a verb is added to the information of a subject, the feature structure can stay the same, or grow, but not otherwise change (cf. the formalisms of LFG, HPSG).

Let us assume that dual forms of verbs are specified as [+HUMAN]. This explains why they co-occur with [+HUMAN] subjects (1), but not with inanimate subject (3). Plural verb forms cannot be specified as [-HUMAN], as they co-occur with non-dual human subjects. Let us assume that the plural verb form is unspecified for the [HUMAN] feature, and is used by default, but blocked when a more highly specified form is possible. This analysis accounts for (1) and (3), but it incorrectly predicts that animal subjects (2) should always take partial agreement and not allow the dual verb form. However, animal subjects optionally trigger dual agreement. A possible solution is to posit that animal subjects are optionally specified as + or - HUMAN. This solution is formally simple and motivated by the data. However, it does not make sense from a more general, typological viewpoint where concepts such as *human*, *animate*, as well as their organization into a hierarchy, are generally intended to denote what is actually referred to in the world. Animals are clearly not in actuality "optionally human". (Replacing [HUMAN] with [ANIMATE] will lead to the same conclusion.)

Oppositions between what is formally elegant and what is typologically intuitive are not uncommon. In addition to Inari Saami, we discuss Persian verbal agreement, where optional agreement in inanimates depends on distributivity (Lotfi, 2006; Hashabeiky, 2007). We will posit an analysis for Persian where inanimate subjects, but not animate subjects, are marked with a [+/-DISTRIBUTIVE] feature. The proposal makes sense formally, but may seem counterintuitive, as entities higher in animacy are more likely to receive an individuated interpretation (Hopper & Thompson 1980).

We argue that it is, for the time being, best to view syntactic animacy features as purely formal, and not worry too much about their connection to the world. Cross-linguistic cognitive/functional tendencies and hierarchies should be described and analyzed separately. Exactly how the two are connected (presumably via semantics) will hopefully become clear when we have a better understanding of the formal properties of language on the one hand, and how humans perceive and categorize the world on the other.