[REVIEW]

Agreement and Its Failures

By Omer Preminger, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014, xvi+291pp.

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1. Introduction

“It is ironic that the first thing one learns can be the last thing one understands” (Baker (2003: 1)). While the quote from Baker reflects the complicated nature of “parts of speech” or lexical categories, similar remarks can be made relating to certain theoretical notions in generative syntax. One of the first things we learn in courses on current minimalist syntax is perhaps the representational view of the obligatory nature of predicate-argument agreement (henceforth ϕ -agreement) (Chomsky (2000), (2001)). Chomsky hypothesizes that uninterpretable features cause the derivation to crash, unless they are checked or deleted via the operation *Agree* before the structure is sent to semantic interpretation. This view has been adopted by many followers of Chomsky’s “interpretability”-based approach, and has rarely been challenged in syntactic literature. When these minimalist courses are over, however, students (and even instructors) probably know little about why uninterpretable features matter to well-formedness at semantic interpretation, although they are “uninterpretable” and hence can be simply ignored. The central theme of Omer Preminger’s 2014 monograph, based on his 2011 MIT doctoral dissertation, is to challenge this widely accepted view of agreement (and *Agree*) and present a totally different understanding of syntactic mechanisms underlying agreement phenomena in natural lan-

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guages.

By showing that there exist grammatical utterances that involve attempted-but-failed agreement, Preminger seeks to argue that Chomsky's theory is inadequate to account for agreement. Preminger constructs his argument, based on a careful, in-depth study of semi-familiar facts about agreement in the Kichean languages of the Mayan family as well as facts from several other languages. This monograph is of great interest to not only Mayan linguists but theoretical syntacticians in general, since Preminger's masterful way of building his argumentation forces us to consider that there should be a better alternative to Chomsky's approach to agreement/*Agree*. The theory presented in this monograph is such an alternative, and I believe that it will play a crucial role in syntactic theory, given that *Agree* plays a central role in numerous syntactic phenomena including case assignment and *wh* movement. The rethinking of agreement and *Agree* is even more important against the backdrop of the recently emerging hypothesis that *Agree* and *Merge* are the only two grammatical operations in human language (Chomsky (2008)).

The book, which consists of eleven chapters, is structured around case studies of failed agreement such as the Agent-Focus construction in the Kichean (chapters 3–5, chapter 7), the conjoint/disjoint alternation in Zulu verbal morphology and the distribution of nouns lacking the nominal augment morpheme, and nonperiphrastic unergative verbs in Basque (chapter 6). Preminger extends the results of these phenomena to dative intervention and shows that this is also an instance of failed agreement (chapter 8). Building on the discussion of dative intervention, he then argues that ϕ -agreement and “morphological case” are part of the syntactic computation, contra Bobaljik (2008) (chapter 9). Finally, he surveys other empirical domains that he claims follow from the proposed theory: e.g. object shift and long-distance *wh*-movement (chapter 10). In this review, I focus on the discussion of the Kichean construction that Preminger considers to be the central empirical domain of his thesis, the Agent-Focus construction, and summarize several central claims relating to it (chapters 1–5).

2. Why Should We Be Interested in Failed Agreement?

The reason failed agreement should be taken seriously in contemporary syntactic theory is, as Preminger argues, that it serves to distinguish several competing models of agreement in natural languages. I go through two of

these below.¹

The first of these models is Chomsky's interpretability-based approach (Chomsky (2000), (2001)), or the *derivational time-bombs* model in Preminger's terms, which is briefly discussed in section 1. In this model, uninterpretable features yield ill-formedness at the semantic interface, unless they are altered or removed via Agree in syntax proper. This follows the logic of Chomsky and Lasnik's (1977) "Filters and Control": (transformational) operations freely apply in the course of derivation, and derivations that do not have well-formed representations are filtered out at the end of the derivation. As Preminger points out, ϕ -agreement can be viewed as a response to the interpretability condition under the derivational time-bombs model. The obligatory nature of ϕ -agreement is thus not specified directly: it is *derivative*. An account of the ungrammaticality of the non-agreeing variant of the Hebrew example given in (1) following this model relates to the fact that the uninterpretable ϕ -features on Infl remain unaltered at the semantic interface.²

- (1) ha-necig-im dibr-u/*diber
 the-representative-Pl spoke-3Pl/spoke(3Sg.Masc)
 'The representatives spoke.' (p. 6, (2))

The second model of agreement is the *obligatory-operations* model, which Preminger defends throughout his monograph. This model "affords obligatory status *directly* to the derivational operation ..." (p. 9: emphasis added). In this regard, Preminger is not alone; he mentions several precursors of his model such as López (2007). In this model, certain operations are obligatory when the relevant structural conditions are met, in the same way that phonological rules (e.g. a final devoicing rule) are (or were) conceived to apply. Following this model, derivations in which the relevant operation is not sanctioned by the grammar yield ungrammaticality. Hence, the non-agreeing variant of (1) is ungrammatical because the otherwise obligatory agreement operation has not taken place—the obligatory operation here may be the one transmitting ϕ -feature values from the closest goal to the probe.

Crucially, in the latter type of model, it is not always the case that an

¹ To be precise, Preminger also considers a third model called the *violable-constraints* model in the context of *Optimality Theory*. He rejects this model on the basis of failed agreement found in dative intervention (= chapter 8).

² The following abbreviations will be used: Abs=absolutive, Af=Agent-Focus morphology, Com=completive aspect, Foc=focus, Masc=masculine, Pl=plural, Sg=singular.

obligatory operation “successfully applies *in every well-formed derivation*” (p. 11). In other words, the obligatory operation, once initiated, fails to culminate successfully when its structural condition is not met. The derivation is still *well-formed* in this case because the requirements of the obligatory-operations model have still been met. This model thus predicts that there exist grammatical instances of attempted-but-failed agreement. As Preminger argues, by contrast, the derivational time-bombs model would wrongly predict that those instances are ungrammatical because offending uninterpretable features are only altered/removed by a successful application of *Agree*. Therefore, if one succeeds in demonstrating the existence of failed agreement, he claims, the derivational time-bombs model is ruled out on empirical grounds.

3. Failed Agreement—Evidence from The Kichean (Mayan)

3.1. Agent-Focus

I will present a brief summary of a construction called *Agent-Focus* (AF) in the Kichean languages of the Mayan family, which Preminger presents as the central empirical domain for his thesis. The data examined in the monograph come from three Kichean languages: Kaqchikel, K'ichee', and Tz'utujil. The targeted language both in the monograph and in this review article is Kaqchikel, unless otherwise noted. Like other Mayan languages, the Kichean languages are head-marking in the sense that there is no case-marking on nominals. Rather, they display an ergative-absolutive alignment through a set of ergative and absolutive morphemes marked on the predicate.

The main focus of Preminger's investigation is the *Agent-Focus* (AF) construction in the Kichean languages. Although other Mayan languages have this construction, Kichean AF is unique in terms of the behavior of verbal agreement. The AF construction arises when the transitive subject is A-bar extracted. This is a common restriction on extraction of the ergative subject (also known as a subcase of *syntactic ergativity*). The verb in the AF construction bears special verbal morphology (= *-ō* or *-(V)n*). In AF constructions, the verb loses its ergative morpheme. As a result, the verb only bears an absolutive morpheme: the verb is morphologically intransitive, while two non-demoted arguments appear as in transitives, unlike in antipassives.

One of the crucial questions regarding Kichean AF is which of the two core arguments (= the subject and the object) will control a single agree-

(2) a. ja rat x-at/* θ -ax-an ri achin
 Foc you(Sg) Com-2Sg/*3Sg.Abs-hear-Af the man
 'It was you(SG) that heard the man.'

b. ja ri achin x-at/* θ -ax-an rat
 Foc the man Com-2Sg/*3Sg.Abs-hear-Af you(Sg)
 'It was the man that heard you(SG).'

(p. 18, (15))

(3) 1st/2nd person > 3rd person plural > 3rd person singular
(p. 21, (23))

In order to account for the “omnivorous agreement” found in Kichean AF, Preminger proposes an explicit theory of ϕ -agreement in Kichean, building on Béjar and Rezac’s (2003) account of the *Person Case Constraint* (henceforth PCC)—a particular condition on the distribution of (marked) person features in certain constructions observed in many languages such as Romance languages, Greek, and Basque. Among the important ingredients of his theory are *relativized probing* and the *separation* of probes for person

features and for number features.

To address the omnivorous agreement patterns found in the Kichean AF construction, Preminger proposes, adopting the insights of Béjar and Rezac (2003) among others, that separate probes for person and number features are involved in the derivation: π^0 and $\#^0$, respectively. In addition, he argues that π^0 and $\#^0$ are feature-relativized to probe for [participant] (= 1st person and 2nd person) and [plural], respectively. The consequence of this relativized probing is that the proposed probes will skip nodes that do not have the features searched for by these probes. While this type of probing might stand out as an exotic invention, it is nothing unusual, as he astutely points out—it is widespread in standard syntactic probing. For example, an interrogative C^0 found in *wh* questions of languages such as English can skip elements that lack the feature sought by the probe (i.e. [wh]): e.g., it skips the subject in the case of object *wh* questions. The interrogative C^0 is thus relativized to the feature [wh].³ In this sense, “all probes are ‘omnivorous’” (p. 47).

The patterns of omnivorous agreement in Kichean AF can be derived from the combination of (i) the separation of probes into π^0 (= person) and $\#^0$ (= number) and (ii) their relativized probing. Preminger proposes the structure as shown in (4) for the AF construction: πP is merged prior to $\#P$, and thus probes first by virtue of cyclicity.

- (4) [$\#P$ $\#^0$ [πP π^0 ... [... SUBJ [... OBJ]]]]

Given that π^0 is relativized to [participant], it successfully finds and agrees with the subject when the latter is 1st/2nd person. In contrast, it skips the subject (= the closest target) when the latter is not 1st/2nd person, just as an interrogative C^0 skips a non-*wh* phrase. The probe reaches and agrees with the object when the latter is 1st/2nd person, as illustrated in (5).

³ Although relativized probing seems rare in the domain of ϕ -agreement, Preminger points out it is not completely absent. As shown in (i), he believes that probing by Infl in English skips the PP and agrees with the third person plural subject DP.

(i) There **are**/?**is** likely [in every class] to be [two troublemakers]. (p. 44, (53))
Unlike in the Kichean AF construction, probing found in (i) appears to proceed based on categorial distinctions (i.e. PPs vs. DPs): Infl in English skips PPs and continues to find DPs for agreement. Following Chomsky (1995) in that category membership is no more than featural specification, Preminger argues, categorial relativization regarding Infl⁰ in English can be taken as an instance of featural relativization, just as in the case of an interrogative C^0 seeking [wh]. To explain the difference between English and the Kichean regarding the range of relativized probing effects, Preminger resorts to the insights of a feature geometry proposed by Harley and Ritter (2002) and McGinnis (2005) (p. 45).

- In this way, Preminger's system can derive the agreement patterns as seen in (2) and part of the salience hierarchy in (3) (= the precedence of 1st/2nd person over 3rd person). The agreement morphology in these examples is thus expected to be identical, despite the fact that the subject and the object are reversed.⁴

When both the subject and the object are 3rd person, by contrast, there will be no clitics since π^0 only searches for [participant] features—probing by π^0 *fails to culminate successfully* in such case (see 3.3 for more discussion). Consequently, the agreement morphology is null when both arguments are 3rd person singular, as seen in (6): the agreement morphology on the verb remains the same when the subject and the object are reversed.

- Preminger claims that in this situation, namely the one in which no clitics appear, the number probe $\#^0$ can appear overtly. (He makes several assumptions about morphological competition (p. 59).) As a result, $\#^0$, which

⁴ Another important facet of verbal agreement found in the Kichean AF construction is that the two core arguments cannot be “local” (= 1st/2nd person): i.e. the *AF person restriction*. Preminger accounts for this restriction by assuming the *Person Licensing Condition* (Béjar and Rezac (2003)), a condition independently developed to explain the PCC. The condition stipulates that 1st/2nd person features “must be licensed by entering into an Agree relation with an appropriate functional category” (p. 63). If one hypothesizes that π^0 can license at most one 1st/2nd person argument, as Preminger claims, the AF person restriction follows—one of the local arguments in the AF construction remains unlicensed.

probes bearers of [plural], is overtly realized as *-e* when both arguments are 3rd person and either of them is plural or both of them are plural, as seen in (7)— $\#^0$ skips the singular subject and continues to probe the plural object in (7b), just as π^0 skips the nominal that does not bear [participant]. Therefore, another part of the salience hierarchy in (3) can be derived: the precedence of 3rd person plural over 3rd person singular. In (6), by contrast, $\#^0$ fails to find plural arguments.

- (7) a. ja rje' x-e/* θ -tz'et-ö rja'
 Foc them Com-3Pl/3Sg.Abs-see-Af him
 'It was them who saw him.'
- b. ja rja' x-e/* θ -tz'et-ö rje'
 Foc him Com-3Pl/3Sg.Abs-see-Af them
 'It was him who saw them.'
- (p. 86, (104))

3.3. Failed *Number* and *Person* Agreement

As Preminger argues, the facts reviewed above suggest that the derivational time-bombs model of ϕ -agreement (Chomsky (2000), (2001)) is inadequate as a means of deriving the obligatoriness of agreement.⁵ In particular, combinations of 3rd person singular nominals in the AF construction such as (6) pose a nontrivial challenge for Chomsky's interpretability-based approach. This approach would predict that examples like (6) should be ungrammatical unless the relevant features such as [plural] on $\#^0$ are checked by an appropriate goal: the [plural] feature would be uninterpretable, causing ill-formedness at the semantic interface in Chomsky's sense. There are no plural arguments in the sentence, and singular arguments are the only candidates for rendering the offending feature interpretable. However, it is important to note that $\#^0$ *can and must* skip 3rd person singular arguments in cases such as (7b); otherwise, it could not reach the third person plural object. If $\#^0$ could agree with the 3rd person singular argument, the 3rd person singular verbal morphology would be possible in (7b), contrary to fact: agreement with the plural object is *obligatory*. This forces us to conclude that uninterpretable features such as [plural] on $\#^0$ could not have been rendered interpretable in (6), and yet the resulting sentence is perfectly grammatical—an instance of tolerated-failed *number* agreement.

⁵ Preminger rejects other possible approaches to agreement in Kichean AF such as *Multiple Agree* on both conceptual and empirical grounds.

One might entertain an alternative analysis in which $\#^0$ in (6) does not bear uninterpretable [plural] and hence the derivation does not crash. However, this lexical-ambiguity-based analysis, Preminger argues, cannot correctly predict which type of probe (i.e. the one with or without the relevant uninterpretable feature) appears—in particular, it cannot explain why the variant of $\#^0$ with [plural], but not the bare variant, must appear in (7).

In a similar vein, Preminger stresses that the derivational time-bombs model cannot explain the existence of failed *person* agreement found in cases such as (6) as well as (7). Neither argument bears [participant]. π^0 seeks bearers of [participant], which could be uninterpretable in Chomsky's approach. However, π^0 in (6) fails to find such argument, and hence Chomsky's model predicts that the sentence is ungrammatical, contrary to fact, since the uninterpretable feature remains unchecked. The 3rd person singular argument cannot be a candidate for checking the relevant feature. The same logic as in failed number agreement applies here: π^0 *can and must* skip the 3rd person argument in order to reach the 1st/2nd person argument in cases such as (2b). Therefore, this leads us to conclude that the sentence is grammatical, despite the fact that uninterpretable [participant] remains unaltered.

Crucially, as Preminger argues, the obligatory-operations model outlined in section 2 fares better than the derivational time-bombs model. In this model, the operation transmitting ϕ -feature values from the goal to the probe is triggered immediately and obligatorily whenever a probe (or head) with an unvalued feature is merged. This is formulated as in (8).

(8) *FIND* (*f*)

Given an unvalued feature *f* on a head H^0 , look for an XP bearing a valued instance of *f* and assign that value to H^0 .

(p. 96, (112))

In the current discussion, the feature *f* in (8) ranges from [participant] to [plural]. Another important aspect of the operation is that it is allowed to fail when the probe does not find an appropriate goal. The requirement of the obligatory operation in (8) would still have been met in such case. Therefore, in those cases where π^0 and $\#^0$ cannot find bearers of [participant] and [plural] as in (6) and (7), the derivation will not result in ungrammaticality—these situations will simply assign no [participant] and [plural] values to π^0 and $\#^0$, respectively. The ungrammaticality of the non-agreeing variant of (7) can then be explained. The derivation in which a [plural] value is not assigned to the probe *is simply not sanctioned* by the grammar. Rather, the operation in (8) culminates successfully when a

probe finds a goal bearing [plural]: i.e., when its structural condition is met.

4. Conclusion

In summary, Preminger provides a carefully crafted analysis of Kichean AF and defends his model for ϕ -agreement (i.e. the obligatory-operations model) with masterful logic, assimilating the Kichean AF construction to other well-known facts such as the PCC. Preminger's work will continue to serve as a strong alternative model to Chomsky's theory of agreement and will stimulate further inquiry into agreement in language.

Nonetheless, there are several issues, I believe, that merit further discussion. First, it is unclear how optional number agreement in Kichean can be addressed in Preminger's theory, although his main focus is on the obligatory nature of agreement. As he admits (fn. 9 of chapter 3), number (or plural) agreement with inanimates in Kaqchikel is optional in some cases, a fact widely observed in Mayan languages (England (2011); see also Imanishi (2014)). Given that $\#^0$ is argued to trigger plural agreement obligatorily when it finds a plural goal in Preminger's theory as formulated in (8), this somewhat exceptional behavior of inanimates requires an explanation. This begs a more general question as to what distinguishes obligatory agreement operations from optional agreement operations in his theory. Related to this, it would be worthwhile examining how Preminger's theory can be extended to capture intricate agreement patterns such as (optional) first conjunct agreement found in the coordinate structure of Kichean, as discussed by Nomura and Sohn (2013) for Kaqchikel. In addition, it remains unclear how abstract Case is treated in Preminger's analysis of Kichean—Mayan languages lack morphological case. A growing amount of work has suggested that Case Filter effects are observed in many Mayan languages including Kichean (Coon (2013), Imanishi (2014) *inter alia*). Against this background, it needs to be considered whether abstract Case is required for argument licensing in Kichean (and Mayan in general): while Preminger briefly discusses ergative licensing, he leaves its details unexplored. If not required, the question emerges as to how 3rd person singular arguments, which do not enter into an Agree relation with any probe in Preminger's analysis, are licensed. While he proposes a particular licensing condition for 1st and 2nd person arguments in the context of AF person restriction (see fn. 4), a thorough discussion of argument licensing in connection to abstract Case is left open. Setting aside these issues, *Agreement and Its Failures* should be added to the must-read list for all syntacticians.

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