

Frankenduals

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Standard English has no dual. A singular noun triggers singular agreement, plural nouns trigger plural agreement, and crosscutting them is ungrammatical (**a singular trigger, *plurals triggers*). Harris (2005) describes, though, an innovative dialect of Belfast English where *the kids is* is allowed with the novel interpretation of “two children”.

Frankenduals—that is, duals stitched together from morphemes used for singular and plural in the absence of dedicated dual morphology—are not news. The field has been aware of them since Jeanne’s (1978) treatment of Hopi and has uniformly upheld her interpretation: that dual is not a grammatical primitive, but is a feature complex intersecting both with singular and with plural.

The field has been far less uniform as concerns what that feature complex is. Accounts differ as to the features’ definitions, valence, markedness, and behaviour at the interfaces. On the basis of the fullest typology of Frankenduals to date (spanning Europe, North America, Papua, Polynesia, and Russia), I argue that this theoretical disagreement is untenable.

The argument turns on the following generalisation: *For N, a nominal with Frankendual, the morpheme closer to N registers (non)singularity, the one further away registers (non)plurality*. (That is, Belfast English could only Frankenstein dual from a plural noun and a singular verb, *the kids is*, and not the reverse, **the kid are*.)

I argue that these facts are captured by a very specific array of assumptions, the cornerstone of which is Noyer’s (1992) definition of the features that Jeanne used (following Hale 1973). As shown in Harbour 2011, these features generate the number system singular-dual-plural only if composed in a particular order: \pm atomic has to act on the noun, and \pm minimal on their output, and not the reverse. This reflects precisely the distribution of sensitivities in the generalisation.

To turn this semantic asymmetry into an explanation of the generalisation, one requires very transparent interfaces between syntax, semantics, and morphology: anything fancier than what-you-see-is-what-you-get loses the generalisation. That is, the right feature definitions alone are not enough: they need the right kind of theory to carry them.

This then leads to the question of what a feature for nominal number is doing in the verbal domain: what business is it of a verb to make a noun dual? This question points to a need to reconceptualise what so-called number features are, and so doing transforms Frankenduals from exotic monsters to the flip side of much more familiar data concerning the interaction between nominal number and verbal aspect.