

On the typology of number concord

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Among languages that exhibit number marking on nouns at least in some contexts and do not employ classifiers, we find two major subclasses. In “number concord” (NC) languages (‘singular object noun languages’ in Rijkhoff 2004), nouns retain plural marking in the presence of (cardinal) numerals, which they also have in their absence (English: *five *book/book-s*; most of Indo-European). In “number discord” (ND) languages (‘set noun languages’ in Rijkhoff 2004), nouns lose plural marking in the presence of numerals, although they have it in their absence (Lezgian: *wad ktab/*ktab-ar*; also e.g. Armenian, Basque, Finnish, Georgian, Hungarian, Turkish, Welsh). The different behavior of languages in this respect poses the question of which factors are responsible for it, which this talk aims to address. To this end, I will first discuss some analyses of the NC-ND split that have been proposed in the literature. One prominent type of analysis relates the split to the semantics of the singular form and takes ND languages to be “special”: the singular form in ND languages is argued to be semantically transnumeral rather than singular (Rijkhoff 2004, Bale et al. 2011). It has, however, been shown by Ionin and Matushansky (2018) that this cannot be the (only) responsible factor, since not all ND languages have transnumeral singular forms (e.g. Finnish and Welsh do not). Instead, Ionin and Matushansky take NC languages to be “special” in that they exhibit semantically vacuous formal number agreement on nouns. Yet, within their system, the question of which factors are responsible for the NC-ND split gets simply reformulated as the question of what is responsible for the fact that a language does or does not exhibit formal number agreement, and thus remains open.

In this context, I will spell out the details of an analysis of DP-internal number concord, which assimilates it to a greater extent to other concord phenomena (e.g. negative concord) by dissociating syntactic number features from the number semantics. In particular, the proposed analysis rests on two basic assumptions. First, languages vary with respect to whether only their plural Num head or also their numerals introduce plural semantics (both only in ND languages), which can be related to the head/phrase status of numerals. Second, only the presence of the plural Num head can trigger plural marking on the noun as a matter of checking/valuation of formal plural features. Toward the end of the talk, these assumptions will be discussed in a broader perspective in connection with two related empirical domains: number marking of higher DP-elements (Det, Dem) and number agreement of the verb with the DP in NC and ND languages. The possibility of extending the analysis to other instances of DP-internal agreement with respect to features other than number will be briefly addressed as well.