

Where Can Linearity Trump Hierarchy in Syntax?

As part of the project ‘Coordinated Research in the Experimental Morphosyntax of South Slavic Languages’, we conducted a comparison of preverbal and postverbal subject-verb agreement in an elicited production study carried out with 60 speakers of six different language varieties in the former Yugoslavia, spanning Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian at local universities. These languages have three genders, and we measured the response type and total reaction time for production for the nine possible combinations of two plural noun phrases. Elicited production experiments for the preverbal and postverbal versions were conducted separately, with 54 items and 54 fillers. In the configuration neuter + feminine preverbally, across all six sites, agreement with the linearly closest conjunct outnumbered agreement with the hierarchically highest conjunct. This stands in stark contrast to the results we found with so-called ‘attraction’ configurations (with a relative clause), where agreement with the linearly closest NP did not outnumber hierarchical agreement. Furthermore, our analysis of gender agreement reveals that preverbal versus postverbal positioning make a large difference in the availability with the linearly *furthest* conjunct: while highest agreement is possible preverbally, lowest-conjunct agreement is essentially unattested postverbally, supporting a hierarchical analysis of conjunction phrases. In sum, while linearly-sensitive agreement can trump hierarchically-based agreement, it is possible specifically in the limited realm of coordination, where the first NP is not the head of the coordination as a whole. In terms of reaction times, we find longest production latencies for the conditions where speakers have the most grammatical options to choose among, suggesting that all three strategies are in principle available, although constrained by syntactic and morphological factors. The consequences of these results will be discussed with respect to three recent theoretical models of conjunct agreement in South Slavic (Boskovic 2009, Puskar & Murphy 2014, Marusic, Nevins & Badecker 2015) and in terms of their prospects for development of a morphosyntactic ‘atlas’ of these closely-related varieties.