The Georgian system of verbal agreement exhibits apparent competition between prefixes, showing a preference for tracking first/second person objects over subjects. This has lead to proposals such as Cyclic Agree (Béjar & Rezac, 2009), which accounts for the distribution of the prefixes in (1) (‘g-’ (2.obj), ‘m-’ (1.obj), ‘∅-’ (2.subj), and ‘v-’ (1.subj)) – in terms of a cyclic intervention effect. Their proposal countered previous morphological approaches in terms of post-syntactic morphology for which the preference is purely accidental, such as Halle & Marantz (1993).

This paper argues that the syntactic approach is untenable, based on a more complete look at the agreement system, as well as comparison with a second South Caucasian language, the Pazar dialect of Laz. I show that a cyclical, bottom-up spellout of spans (Starke, 2009; Caha & Pantcheva, 2012) is equipped to capture the aforementioned preference, as well as the distribution of suffixes.

(1) a. mo-g-klav
   fut.pv-2-kill
   ‘I will kill you sg.’

b. mo-m-klav
   fut.pv-1-kill
   ‘You sg will kill me.’

c. mo-v-klav
   fut.pv-1-kill
   ‘I will kill him.’

d. mo-∅-klav
   fut.pv-2-kill
   ‘You will kill him.’

e. *mo-v-g-klav
   fut-1-2-kill
   ‘I will kill you.’

f. mo-g-klav
   fut-2-kill
   ‘I will kill you.’

    Georgian – Aronson (1990, p.171)

The primary evidence against Agree based approaches to the phenomenon (e.g. Béjar, 2003; Béjar & Rezac, 2009; McGinnis, 2008; Lomashvili & Harley, 2011) comes from the distribution of the agreement suffixes. In these accounts, the fact that first person objects spell out plural at the prefix while second person objects do so at the suffix, cannot be trivially expressed, as the morphological slots are presumed to correlate to the syntactic probes. Furthermore, the fact that ‘-s’ (3.sg.subj) is bled by ‘-t’ in (2d) remains unexplained.

(2) a. mo-m-klav-s
   fut.pv-1-kill-3.sg
   ‘He will kill me.’

b. mo-go-klav-s
   fut.pv-1-kill-3.sg
   ‘He will kill us.’

c. mo-g-klav-s
   fut.pv-1-kill-3.sg
   ‘He will kill you sg.’

d. mo-g-klav-(*-s)-t
   fut.pv-1-kill-(*3.sg)-pl
   ‘He will kill you pl.’
The same apparent constraint on co-occurrence of ‘*-s-t’ (3.sg-pl) holds in Laz as well, but violation is avoided by using the fused 3.pl.subj in this context (3b,d). In addition, Laz lacks a counterpart to ‘gv-’, resulting in symmetry for the spellout of first and second person objects: Both spell out their plurality at the suffix:

(3)  
a. \textit{dze-m-tjam-s}  
\textit{pv-1-hit-3.sg}  
‘He hits me.’

b. \textit{dze-m-tjam-an}  
\textit{pv-2-hit-3.pl}  
‘He hits us.’

c. \textit{dze-k-tjam-s}  
\textit{pv-2-hit-3.sg}  
‘He hits you sg.’

d. \textit{dze-k-tjam-an}  
\textit{pv-2-hit-3.pl}  
‘He hits you pl.’

I argue that these facts are best captured by a spellout mechanism operating on a structure in which the object probe (presumably on \textit{v^0}) is low-adjoined to the subject probe on \textit{T^0} (i.e. reflecting the syntactic hierarchy), resulting in a structure as in (4)

(4) \[ \text{[Tense [Num\textsubscript{subj} [Pers\textsubscript{subj} [Num\textsubscript{obj} [Pers\textsubscript{obj}]]]]]} \]

This approach derives the apparent preference for local objects from the bottom-up nature of spellout: Object features are simply spelled out before subject features. It also captures the behavior of the object’s plural feature: Whether it is spelled out at the prefix (Georgian ‘gv-’), or at the suffix, is simply a question of lexical specification: If there is a suffix that can spell out the respective [Num\textsubscript{obj} [Pers\textsubscript{obj}]], it is spelled out as the biggest possible span, otherwise (i.e. Georgian second person, Laz) it is spelled out with the suffix. Using spans, the approach aims to replace morphological operations such as Fusion or Fission, by suggesting that the morphological items split up the structure as per their timing & specification: Lower structure is spelled out first. The size of the first cycle of spellout (determined by competition between morphological items) determines the lowest part of the next cycle of spellout, with no modification of the structure itself being necessary.

References


