

Compositional person features and antisymmetric speech acts

Summary

The traditional view that first, second and third person singulars and plurals are symmetrical values within the same paradigm, was challenged by Benveniste (1966). He defined first and second person as true person values and third person as absence of person features. Harley & Ritter (2002) pursued this idea in a more articulated feature–geometrical approach. In the current paper, I argue for a further split between the “true” person values. This split concerns the level at which constants like first and second person are introduced and takes advantage of the configurational approach of speech act participants as argued for by Speas & Tenny (2003). The proposal implies that person features are compositional, at a syntactic, morphological and semantic level.

1. Background

1.1 Speas & Tenny (2003) argue that clauses are embedded within the specifier of a speech act projection (SAP), whose external specifier hosts the speech act role of the SPEAKER and whose complement is the HEARER:

(1) [_{SAP} SPEAKER SA [_{SA*} UTTERANCE CONTEXT [SA* HEARER]]]

1.2 Harley & Ritter (2002) argue that the feature composition of personal pronouns is both compositional and hierarchically articulated. Simplifying, pronouns combine primitive features as 1p., 2p. and pl as sketched in (2).

(2)		1p.	2p.		1p.	2p.	pl.
	“1p.sg.”	✓		“1p.pl. excl.”	✓	✓	✓
	“1p.sg.incl.”	✓	✓	“1 p.pl. incl.”	✓		✓
	“2p.sg.”		✓	“2p.pl.”		✓	✓
	“3p.sg.”			“3p.pl.”			✓

2. Claims

In this paper I will argue in favor of the following two claims:

- (3) a The interpretive variation of personal pronouns follows from the interaction between the feature composition of pronouns and the syntactic representation of speech act participants (3.1–3.3).
b The compositional nature of pronouns implies that agreement patterns are compositional as well (3.4).

3. Predictions

3.1 In the configuration for declaratives in (1) the SPEAKER c-commands the clausal domain, while the HEARER does not. Assuming that speaker and hearer are constants that are introduced in a speech act domain, it follows that any occurrence of a 1p. (sg.) pronoun directly accesses this constant, and behaves as a bound variable, unable to shift its interpretation within the same speech act domain (SAP). 2p. pronouns, on the other hand, cannot access the constant introduced in the complement position of SA*, and need to be reintroduced within the clausal domain. It follows that each introduction of a 2p. pronoun in the clausal domain can shift its reference. This prediction is borne out by the fact that second person (singular) pronouns can be coordinated within the same clause (with indexical readings) – see (4) – while first person singular pronouns cannot (see also Rooryck 2006).

- (4) I am talking to you₁ and you₂.
I am neither convinced by your₁ arguments nor by your₂ counter-arguments.

Speas and Tenny (2003) claim that in imperatives the SPEAKER complement of the SA projection moves to a position from which it c-commands the clausal domain (the utterance

content). Interestingly, in imperatives 2p. pronouns cannot shift their reference clause-internally:

(5) *Reconsider your₁ arguments and your₂ counter-arguments.

3.2 In the external specifier position of SAP, the reference of the speaker, hence of 1p. singular is determined. Assuming that personal pronouns are compositional, it follows that 1p. plural pronouns can partially shift their reference: the shifting does not affect the 1p. (sg.) value (determined in Spec, SAP) but only the set of referents that add up to 1p. through the plural feature. This prediction is borne by sentences like (6) where the first occurrence of we may include a lawyer, and the second one not.

(6) We refuse to plead guilty for a crime we did not commit.

3.3 The constant introduced as Speaker in Spec, SAP is never overtly realized. I claim that this property explains why contrary to all other personal pronouns, 1p. (sg.) never display gender variation (Plank & Schellinger 1997): 1p. (sg.) pronouns are bound variables and therefore cannot alter or specify the gender specification. Consider, e.g., the contrast between Spanish 1p.sg. and 1p.pl. pronouns:

(7) 1p.sg. yo 'I' / mi 'me'
 1p.pl.m. nosotros 'we (m.)'
 1p.pl.f. nosotras 'we (f.)'

3.4 The consequence of a compositional approach to personal pronouns is that agreement phenomena are compositional as well. This suggests that these agreement phenomena are expressed through multiple spec-head relations, each checking one feature, rather than a single spec-head relation checking a bundle of features. The development of Italian verbal morphology, and more specifically of the 1p.pl. ending supports this prediction.

From the exemplary paradigms in (8) I conclude that the form associated to the /pl./ feature is /s/ in (Vulgar) Latin and /i/ in Italian (8a) and that /m/ is the form expressing /1p./ (8b). I assume that these features are also realised in the verbal paradigm as illustrated in (9a).

		Latin (acc)	Italian	Lt /pl./	It /pl./
(8)	a	sg.	romanu(m)	romano	
		pl.	romanos 'Roman(s)'	romani	s i
	b	pers.pron.	me	me, mi	
		poss.pron.	meu(m)	mio	
(9)	a	1p.pl.	canta MuS 'we sing'	cant laMo	
	b		/1p./ ... /pl./	/pl./ ... /1p./	

Under the analysis in (9a), it becomes clear that in the development from Latin to Italian, a relative reordering has taken place between the two features (9b). This reordering explains the extreme levelling (analogical operation) that has taken place in the Italian verbal paradigm. More importantly, the fact that such reordering can take place, calls for a structurally distinct position in which /pl./ and /1p./ are checked.

Conclusion

The hypothesis that both personal pronouns (Harley & Ritter 2002) and agreement are compositional, in combination with the hypothesis that speech act participants are syntactically active (Speas & Tenny 2003) yields a system in which the clause-internal interpretive variability does not need to be stipulated but can be read off directly from the structure.