T-agreement is not subject-oriented: information structure, agreement, and non-subjects in TP

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SpecTP, and following Rizzi (1997), specFinP have been treated as canonical "high subject positions," and it has been assumed that subjects raise into these positions from their base position inside vP (Sportiche, 1988). Subjects (either raised or in situ) also canonically trigger verbal agreement on finite tensed verbs in TP/FinP, leading to an assumed link between T-agreement, tense, and the phi-features of subjects. This treatment of TP assumes that agreement on T^0 will always be with a subject and that non-subjects will behave in a fundamentally different way. This is not borne out cross-linguistically. In fact, the phi-features of T^0 will always be valued by the closest phi-bearing goal. I propose that the source of T's phi-features and the ability of non-subjects to agree with T depends on the realization of a topic phrase below TP.

The canonical distinction between the behavior of subjects and non-subject topics can be seen in the contrast between (1a) and (1b) in German.

1a) Ich habe das Buch gelesen.
I have.1s the book read
"I have read the book."

1b) Das Buch habe ich gelesen.
The book have.1s I read.
"The book, I have read."

The object in (1b) is in a higher projection than that occupied by the subject in (1a). It is topicalized for information structural reasons, but it does not participate in an agree relationship with the verb and is not a subject. The phi-features of T^0 are still valued by the subject. Note that the subject in (1b) still triggers first person agreement on *habe*. In German, a relation is established between T/Fin and the subject, even when the higher CP elements are engaging in information structural relationships with non-subject material.

However, this relationship between verbal agreement and subjects is not cross-linguistic. Carstens (2005) points out the possibility of verbal agreement being usurped by a non-subject in Kilega, (Bantu). Verbal agreement may be with an object as in (2b) or a locative as in (3).

2a) Mutu t-á-ku-sol-ág-á maku wéneéne. (Kilega, Carstens, 2005)
1person NEG-1AGR-PROG-drink-HAB-FV 6beer alone
"A person does not usually drink beer alone."

2b) Maku ta-má-ku-sol-ág-á mutu wéneéne.
6beer NEG-6AGR-PROG-drink-HAB-FV 1person alone
"No one usually drinks beer alone."

3) Ku-Lúgushwá kú-kili ku-á-twag-a nzogu maswá. (Kilega, Carstens, 2005)
17-Lúgushwá 17SA-be.still 17SA-A-stampede-FV10 elephant 6farm
"At Lugushwa are elephants still stampeding over (the) farms."

Carstens proposes that operator movement within the vP moves the relevant NP over the subject, allowing it to value the unvalued phi features of T.

In Algonquian languages, it is also possible to have the highest verbal agreement affix correspond to an object rather than a subject. Note that although (4b) is translated as a passive, the construction is not a passive. Both arguments are obligatorily realized.

4a) Pesq muwin '-toli-nuhsuphoqal-a mahtoqehsu. (Passamaquoddy, Bruening, 2005)
one bear 3-Prog-chase-Dir.ObvPl rabbit.ObvPl
'One bear (Prox) was chasing some rabbits (Obv).'

4b) Mahtoqehs '-toli-nuhsuphoqal-ku-l muwinuw-ol.
rabbit 3-Prog-chase-Inv-Obv bear-Obv
'A rabbit (Prox) was being chased by a bear (Obv).'

Bruening (2005) attributes this pattern to an EPP feature on the inverse morpheme in VoiceP which raises the object into specVoice. In direct sentences, both arguments remain in situ prior to the merger of TP, making the subject the highest goal for unvalued phi in T.

I argue that both Carsten's operator movement and Bruening's VoiceP should be treated as IP-internal information structural movement and that both serve to topicalize a non-subject, moving it to the left-edge of the verb complex and making its phi-features available to be probed by T. These cases are contrasted with those in (1) where T's phi features are valued by those of the in situ subject as the closest goal, while a topic phrase in the CP layer selects a topic from lower within the IP. No privileged relationship exists between the canonical subject and the TP/CP system. Instead, the subject is overwhelmingly likely to be the closest goal for the unvalued tense and phi-features of phrases merged above VP. Elements other than the subject may become the closest goal to probes in T if movement of a non-subject element has taken place lower in the structure. Information structurally driven movements below TP feed relationships between canonical subject positions and non-subjects.

Following Roberts and Roussou (2002), the idea of subject as a default argument to enter into an agree relationship with T is maintained, although the idea that this relation is inherent to the TP and that movement of non-subjects must be to positions above TP is broken down. Instead, TP phi-valuation is achieved through a probe-goal relationship between T^0 and the absolute closest phi-bearing goal, which may be either a subject or an IP-internal topic. I propose that the distinction between languages that allow non-subject agreement on T and those that do not is not due to nay difference in the behavior of the T^0 probe. Instead, I argue that the availability of a low topic position feeds non-subject T-agreement in some languages (e.g Kilega and Passamaquoddy), while in others (e.g. German), information structural movement is available only to positions above TP.

References:

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