

## Agree, Feature gluttony and Person Hierarchy in Copular Clauses: Evidence from German

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**BACKGROUND** The universal and language specific properties of Agree as a syntactic operation have been extensively discussed in recent literature, with copular clauses featuring prominently in the discussion as a range of languages exhibit two potential nominal targets for Agree in such constructions. While Béjar & Kahnemuyipour (2017) have observed for Eastern Armenian that the featurally more specified target is agreed with, skipping potential intervening targets, Coon & Keine (2021) (=C&K) have argued that a highly specified probe will agree with less specified goals on the search path in addition to the the goal (if any) that exactly matches it. Such multiple agreement leads to ineffability when it results in conflicting features that cannot be morphologically expressed, both in copular clauses and more generally. C&K appeal to this mechanism to explain classic cases of Person Case Constraint (=PCC) effects on clitic combinations, but also to account for what they take to be parallel effects in German copular clauses with two nominals. They argue on the basis of largely experimental data that in this language the subject of a copular clause like those in (1) cannot be 3rd person if the second DP is 1st or 2nd person. In order to explain this pattern they assume that the probe in German is specified for both [Person] and [Participant]. When the probe encounters a 1st or 2nd person goal, the search ends and leads to full person agreement, as in (1-a). In the opposite order, they claim, the probe agrees with the initial noun phrase for person, but keeps searching for a [participant] feature which it finds on the second DP. This results in a conflicting feature specification of the probe that cannot be morphologically expressed. When the verb form is syncretic in past tense, the effect, they argue, disappears, as in (2).

- (1) a. Du                    bist        Martin                    (2) ?Martin            war            ich.  
      PRN.NOM.2.SG COP.2.SG M.NOM.3.SG            Martin.NOM was.3SG/1SG I.NOM  
      b. \*Martin        ist            Du                    'Martin was me.'  
          Martin.3.SG COP.3.SG PRN.2.SG  
(Coon & Keine 2021: 689,687, their judgments)

C&K label these Hierarchy Effects in parallel to PCC restrictions and account for both in the same way: a conflicting specification on the probe leads to ineffable structures.

**DATA** C&K's approach has been successfully extended to Hindi in Bhatia & Bhatt (2023), however the strong ungrammaticality of the Hindi data reported there brings into sharp relief the relative weakness of the effect reported for German in Keine et al. (2019), the data on which the analysis in Coon & Keine (2021) is based. Remarkably, although they cite the hierarchy-violating cases as ungrammatical, their data show that—as they acknowledge—the absolute ratings are relatively high (mean of 4.8. on 6-point scale, with a range of variance).

In this talk we will report on the results of an experiment that we have run in an attempt to replicate C&K's findings and to additionally test their predicted—but not experimentally tested—claims regarding the improvement due to syncretism in cases like (2). We used mistaken-identity sentences in which one person is taken for another, providing plausible readings with contexts, such as (3). Participants were asked to rate the test sentence's naturalness on a 7-point scale. We tested the 6 conditions in (4):

- (3) Context: Lou, Kim and Mara work for the fire department and have a joint assignment. Due to the protective clothing they have to wear, they are no longer easily recognizable, so Mara can no longer tell her colleagues apart. Lou says to a colleague / to Kim

(4) Mara meint, ...  
Mara thinks,

	1 > 3	3 > 1	2 > 1
<b>ind</b>	A dass ich sie bin. that I her be.1SG	B dass sie ich ist. that she I be.3SG	C dass du ich bist. that you I be.2SG
<b>subj</b>	D dass ich sie wäre. that I she be.SUBJ.1/3SG	E dass sie ich wäre. that she I be.SUBJ.1/3SG	F dass du ich wärst. that you I be.SUBJ.2SG

If the feature hierarchy is at work in German, we expect that the acceptability of condition [B] will drop significantly, in contrast to [A] but that this effect will be ameliorated in the subjunctive condition [E] where the verb is syncretic for first and second person. Additionally, we added the conditions [C] and [F], as we found in a prestudy that there is a slight preference for 1st person pronouns to come first independently of whether the second nominal/pronoun is 2nd or 3rd person.

Our results from 89 participants show that there is a small but significant difference between the predicted ungrammatical 3>1 combination and the licit 1 > 3 / 2>1 variants across both indicative and subjunctive, see Fig 1. There is no effect of syncretism. That is, participants had an overall preference for the subjunctive, but it was no greater when it resulted in syncretism than elsewhere. None of the ratings are in the range of bad, or even medium-bad standard filler sentences (based on Featherston 2009) plotted in Fig 2.

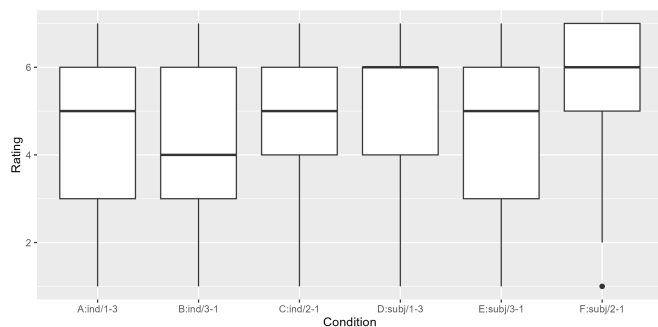


Fig 1. Ratings of mistaken-identity sentences per condition

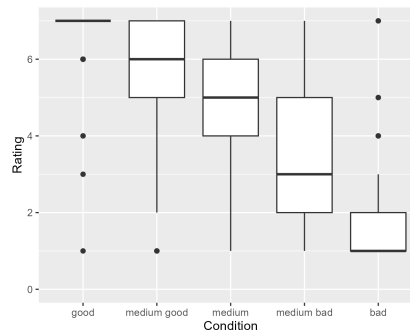


Fig 2. Standardized filler sentences

**DISCUSSION AND CROSS-LINGUISTIC VARIATION** Our results show that there is a small hierarchy effect across all conditions, however, it does not lead to the strong unacceptability observed for Hindi/Urdu (see Bhatia & Bhatt 2023). Additionally, there is no effect of syncretism as expected under feature gluttony. This does not mean that our data should be taken to argue against feature gluttony in copular clauses in general. Instead we would like to propose that, as has been argued for elsewhere, languages can differ with respect to the specificity of their probes. In German, we argue (*contra* C&K) that the probe is not specified for [participant] but only [person]. Hence it agrees with the highest nominative phrase in the domain and stops probing once it finds the respective goal. The weak dispreference for 3>1 variants that we—and C&K—observed might be due to a non-grammaticalized semantico-pragmatic effect relating to conflicting perspectival centres, following the ideas of Pancheva & Zubizarreta (2018).

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