A semantics-morphology mismatch in Tamil allocutive agreement
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Consider the phenomenon of ‘allocutive agreement’ in the Souletin dialect of Basque, where the
form of agreement chosen depends not only on the subject and object of the clause, but also on
the gender, number and status of the addressee. All four examples in (1) mean ‘Peter worked’,
but would be used in speaking to different people (data originally from Oyharçabal, 1993):

(1) a. To a male friend
   Pettek lan egin dik.
   ‘Peter worked.’

b. To a female friend
   Pettek lan egin din.

c. To higher status addressee (formal)
   Pettek lan egin dizü.

d. To a plural addressee
   Pettek lan egin du.
   Peter.ERG work.ABS do.PRF aux-3.S.ABS-3.S.ERG

Miyagawa (to appear) and Haegeman and Miyagawa (2016) analyze this pattern, along with
honorific agreement in Japanese and certain particles in West Flemish and Romanian, as evidence
for a syntactic speech act layer in the left periphery. The allocutive marker in Basque,
e.g., is agreeing directly in the syntax with the representation of the addressee in this layer.
In this talk, I will present novel data on a type of allocutive agreement from fieldwork on the Dra-
vidian language Tamil, which supports the basic thrust of Miyagawa and Haegeman’s analyses,
but sheds additional light on important details due to certain crucial properties that distinguish
it from what is found in the other languages, and presents an interesting semantics-morphology
mismatch when it occurs in polar questions. The marker in question, -ngæ, typically appears
in short utterances lacking an actual verbal form, and marks formality with respect to the ad-
ressee. E.g. it can appear on illæ, the word meaning ‘no’ (as a response to a yes/no question),
yielding a formal version illæ-ngæ. Similarly we find aama-ngæ ‘yes’, thanks-˘ungæ ‘thank you’
and særi-ngæ‘ok’. Based on its formal properties, it is particularly easy to make the case that
what we are seeing is a type of agreement with the addressee, rather than a sui generis hon-
orific marker. Tamil has straightforward subject agreement on its finite verb forms, including
a distinct 2nd person formal form. Crucially, not only is the allocutive marker -ngæ used with
precisely those addressees with whom the speaker would use formal subject agreement, but it is
also clearly related morphologically to that form, which is -iingæ, as seen in (2).

(2) niingæ enge poo-r-iingæ?
   you.FRM where go-PRS-2FRM
   ‘Where are you going?’

I will argue that this strengthens considerably the contention of Miyagawa and Haegeman that
there must be a syntactic representation of the hearer/addressee in these utterances that is trig-
gering a normal agreement operation.
What is perhaps even more interesting is that the Tamil pattern can yield more direct informa-
tion about where that representation of the hearer/addressee is positioned with respect to other
elements of the left periphery. For Basque, the pattern seems to be that allocutive agreement is
ruled out in contexts where C is overtly realized, specifically in embedded clauses (which have
an overt complementizer) and in matrix questions (which include an overt question marker, ar-
guably in C). This can be argued to indicate that allocutive agreement is itself realized in C,
and is competing for a single slot with the complementizers and question markers (Oyharçabal, 1993). In Tamil, allocutive agreement also seems to be restricted to root contexts, but it freely and frequently co-occurs with the overt polar question marker -aa, as in (3b), contrasting with the informal (3a).

(3) a. indæ biitfū peerù Marina, illæj-aa?
   this  beach name Marina, no-Q
   ‘This beach’s name is Marina, isn’t it?’  (informal)

b. indæ biitfū peerù Marina, ilæ-ngaæ-[aa]
   this  beach name Marina, no-ALLOC.FRQ
   ‘This beach’s name is Marina, isn’t it?’  (formal)

We can thus use the distribution of -ngaæ to probe into the internal make-up of the left periphery of the clause. Interestingly enough, it appears on the surface strictly inside the question marker, arguably the opposite of what we might expect based on the the semantics of such utterances, i.e. we have a puzzling semantics-morphology mismatch. Morpho-syntactically, the question marker appears outside the honorific speech act marker, but the interpretation is the other way around, such that the question is part of a speech act, with an addressee toward whom the speaker is showing deference. Furthermore, as in Basque, allocutionary agreement appears to be in complementary distribution with subject agreement. I will argue that these two points are connected, and are related to the phenomenon of ‘monstrous agreement’ in the language, discovered by Sundaresan (2012) and demonstrated in (4). Here the embedded verb bears 1st singular agreement, even though the embedded subject is notionally 3rd person, just when it is an anaphor, bound by the author of a matrix speech predicate, which is distinct from the utterance speaker.

   ‘Raaman, said [that he, would win].’

Sundaresan argues that the embedded subject is ineligible to trigger agreement, due to the Anaphor Agreement Effect (Rizzi, 1990), thus the relevant φ probe continues probing, eventually agreeing with the silent representation of the author of the speech predicate as a shifted indexical, hence the 1st person agreement. I will argue that something parallel is happening with allocutive agreement: in the absence of a subject, the φ probe is able to continue probing into the higher left periphery, where it agrees with the representation of the hearer/addressee in the Speech Act Phrase. This allows us to make sense of the mismatch of the semantics with the ordering of allocutionary agreement and the question marker: while the latter is simply a head, realized directly where we would expect given its position in the left periphery, -ngaæ realizes an agreement probe lower in the T domain, which however reflects, via agreement, the φ features of an element represented and interpreted much higher in the left periphery.

References


