Singular Concord in Ottawa Valley English

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Abstract

This paper investigates a syntactic phenomenon known as singular concord as it exists in the dialect known as Ottawa Valley English. Ottawa Valley English singular concord is compared and contrasted with a similar agreement phenomenon in Arabic, and with singular concord as it exists in Belfast English. The result is a description of the phenomenon in Ottawa Valley English, including productivity and restrictions, and an account and analysis of the phenomenon in that dialect, along with insights into the singular concord family of phenomena overall.

1. Introduction

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This paper investigates a dialect of Canadian English known as Ottawa Valley English (henceforth OVE). This dialect exists separately from Standard Canadian English (henceforth SCE) in the Ottawa Valley, a region of Ontario and Quebec that extends from the convergence of the St Lawrence River and the Ottawa River at Lac Les Deux Montagnes, near Montreal, and continues northwest through Algonquin Park (Pringle & Padolsky, 1983). Existing work on OVE focuses on the dialect's lexicon and phonology (Pringle & Padolsky, 1983; Woods, 1979), but this paper aims to begin research into the dialect's morphosyntax. It will focus specifically on a detailed account and analysis of a sing0 Tm /F4.01 Tf ((Pringle) Tj ET Q q 0clSSSSSular3.2400000 85.05006 378.87cm BT 50 0 BT 50 0 0 5

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2.1 Origins of Singular Concord

This phenomenon appears to have come into English dialects as a result of language contact with the Celtic languages (Hickey, 2007; Bobaljik & Carnie, 1996). The Celtic languages show two different types of verb agreement, one involving full agreement (or concord) and the other involving less than full agreement, and each of these is associated with a different word order. Full agreement occurs with an SVO word order, while less

This is supported by the fact that singular concord in BE occurs with any verb (Henry, 1995), while in OVE singular concord only occurs with *be*. There is also evidence that

Ulster English

5. Me and them'**s** crakkin.
   'They and I are chatting.'

The phenomenon is also attested in Celtic languages, so it is possible that these Old English dialects as well as Irish English and Scottish English developed singular concord as a result of language contact (Hickey, 2007). In Roberts and Borsley (1996), Bobaljik and Carnie propose that while Irish Gaelic is a verb raising language it does not require that the subject NP move to the SPEC/AGR_SP, but rather it may remain in SPEC/Tense, and the verb also is not required to raise all the way to AGR_S. While Irish word order is not always the same as English, this instance of optional lack of raising, which allows the verb to remain in Tense and the sub

restrictions, and ordering restrictions. The first section will illustrate the environment in which singular concord can occur in OVE, and the second two will describe the restrictions that exist with the phenomenon. OVE singular concord will be seen to be case-related, and it will also be made clear that OVE singular concord stands out from many other English varieties of singular concord in that it may only occur with *be*, while in other dialects it is generally all lexical verbs that are included (Henry, 1995; Hickey, 2007).

3.1 Productivity

+ , - .!/0!!2345 00!. , 5!.53056!7589! : ; ; 280!/3!/ .0!$86!<580 : 3!

c. The kids **is** going to go swimming later.
‘The kids are going to go swimming later.’

d. Them cows **is** Holsteins. [As opposed to another kind of cow.]
‘Those cows are Holsteins.’ [As opposed to another kind of cow.]

e. The kids **was** taught by Mrs. Fraser down in Arnprior.
‘The kids were taught by Mrs. Fraser down in Arnprior.’

3.1.3 Tenses

Singular concord in OVE is also productive across tenses, as in the following examples.

10. a. Eva and Dorothy **was** going to the store.
y00000 0j ET Q q 0.2400000 0 0 0.2400sE1

16. a. Where’**s** the tools?
Where **is** the tools?
‘Where are the tools?’

3.3 Ordering Restrictions

3.3.1 Adverbs

In instances of regular agreement, adverbials can occur before or after the verb, as in the following examples.

Regular Agreement

19. a. The cows **are** surely big.

    b. The cows surely **are** big.

    c. Mary and Margaret **were** never angry.

    d. Mary Margaret never **were** angry.

    e. Jim and Kevin **are** really feeding the cows.

    f. Jim and Kevin really **are** feeding the cows.

In OVE singular concord, the adverb cannot occur between the subject and the verb, and so it may only occur after the verb. Thus the sentences in 15 are ungrammatical.

OVE Singular Concord

20. a. *The cows surely **is** big.
    'The cows surely are big.'

    b. *Mary and Margaret never **was** angry.
    'Mary and Margaret never were angry.'

    c. *Jim and Kevin really **is** feeding the cows.
    'Jim and Kevin really are feeding the cows.'

And, by the same logic, the sentences below are grammatical.

21. a. The cows **is** surely big.
    'The cows are surely big.'

    b. Mary and Margaret **was** never angry.
    'Mary and Margaret were never angry.'

c. Jim and Kevin **is** really feeding the cows.
'Jim and Kevin are really feeding the cows.'

In summary, the singular concord form of the verb itself appears to be what is, under normal circumstances, the form that agrees with a third person singular subject. In OVE it occurs only with the tense verb *be*, and is productive across all tenses and all usages (copula, periphrastic, equative, and locative). It is also productive across all persons that are not overly marked for nominative, except for 3sg and 1sg pronouns, which can only occur with singular concord if they are part of a larger NP, indicating that the phenomenon is case-related. It is also impossible to have singular concord when an adverb appears between the subject and the verb. These characteristics and restrictions are in effect whether the sentence is a statement or a question, and whether it is passive or active.

4. Singular Concord & Similar Phenomena in Other Languages

Now that a detailed description of the OVE singular concord phenomenon has been established, a full account of its nature can be made. As noted previously, singular concord has been documented in various dialects of English (Henry, 1995; Godfrey & Tagliamonte, 1999; Pietsch, 2005; Hickey, 2007; Millar, 2007), and there also exist similar phenomena in the Celtic languages (Bobaljik & Carnie, 1996) and in Arabic

account that places the subject of singular concord sentences in a different position in the sentence structure than in standard agreement (Mohammad, 1989).

Mohammad's (1989) analysis of Arabic is conducted within a Minimalist framework, so a typical sentence would look like this:

[CP [AGRSP [TP [AGROP [VP]]]]]

In sentences with standard agreement, subject NPs are checked for case by raising to SPEC/AGR_S and objects to SPEC/AGR_0. The following sentence shows Arabic standard agreement (from Mohammad, 1989). Here the subject is in SPEC/AGR_SP, where it is checked for nominative case, and the verb is in VP.

22. l-ʔawlaad-u jaaʔuu.
    the-boys-NOM came3plMASC
    [CP [AGRSP the boys [TP [AGR0P [VP [V

4.2

28.

When BE singular concord occurs with *be*, a raising verb, it displays the same adverb ordering restrictions as OVE singular concord in that it is impossible when an adverb comes between the subject and a (raising) verb (Henry, 1995):

32. *The children <u>really</u> **is** late.
'The children really are late.'

But the adverb-verb order is possible in BE singular concord with lexical verbs (from Henry, 1995):

33. These books <u>probably</u> **costs** a lot.
'These books probably cost a lot.'

BE singular concord is also possible in wh-questions like OVE singular concord, but impossible in polar questions (from Henry, 1995):

34. a. ***Is** the children tired?
'Are the children tired?'

b. Where'**s** my glasses?
'Where are my glasses?'

Like Mohammad, Henry argues that BE singular concord does not actually involve any kind of agreement mismatch, but in fact involves a lack of agreement marking entirely, in that the 3sg verb form in BE singular concord is a default agreement (Henry, 1995). Her configurational account suggests that this occurs because the subject does not raise into SPEC/AGR_SP and thus cannot copy its features to AGR. Instead, Henry posits that in BE, Tense can optionally check 'default' (i.e. accusative) case, so the subject only has to rise as BE

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occur with a subject in nominative case, it appears that the subject is not in a position for nominative case to be checked/assigned.

Using Mohammad's treatment of Arabic non-standard agreement, however, would not be able to explain OVE singular concord's adverb and subject restrictions; there is no reason for any adverb or subject restrictions to apply in the case of non-standard verb agreement in Arabic.

There is also the problem of word order when applying Mohammad's treatment of Arabic agreement to OVE singular concord. Arabic singular concord can only occur with VSO sentences, and we do see VSO word order in OVE polar questions where singular concord is present:

36. a. **Is** you heading off to the barn?
[$_{CP}$ Is$_i$ [$_{TP}$ you t_i heading off to the barn]]?

b. *$_{NP}$[e]is a cat in the yard.
'There is a cat in the yard.'

Beyond that, many OVE singular concord sentences do not require an expletive at all:

39. a. Josh and me **is** going for a walk.
'Josh and I are going for a walk.'

Therefore, we cannot fully extend Mohammad's (1989) null expletive hypothesis for Arabic non-standard agreement to OVE and say that a null expletive fills the subject position in SPEC/AGR$_S$P. However, we can say that for OVE singular concord, the subject may not be in SPEC/AGR$_S$P, since this is where nominative case is checked and OVE singular concord is impossible with overtly nominative subjects. To obtain more detail we must move on to an English dialect with SVO word order.

5.2 OVE Singular Concord and Henry's Treatment of BE Singular Concord

Henry's configurational account of BE singular concord is quite well-supported by the facts of that dialect: placing the singular concord subject in SPEC/TenseP and having Tense optionally check for 'default' (accusative) case predicts that this construction is available to all verbs in all tenses, and the impossibility of overtly nominative subjects is explained without needing a null expletive in AGR$_S$P as in Arabic non-standard agreement (Henry, 1995). Henry's treatment of BE also accounts for the BE singular concord restrictions on singular pronouns as subject, and on polar questions and adverb position (when singular concord occurs with a raising verb) (Henry 1995).

Applied directly to OVE singular concord, this analysis would explain the impossibility of singular concord with overtly nominative subjects: if the subject remains in SPEC/TP, which in this analysis is the only way the 'default' agreement can be produced, then the subject cannot be checked for nominative case, resulting in singular concord.

Using Henry's treatment of BE singular concord would also correctly predict the verb appearing to have 3sg agreement, since in Henry's account of BE, 3sg verb agreement

is considered to be the ‘default’ agreement that occurs when the subject is not checked for nominative case.

However, this analysis would not account for the fact that OVE singular concord can occur with a 2sg subject, since BE singular concord cannot occur with any singular pronouns as subjects. And Henry’s analysis does not explain why BE singular concord cannot occur with singular pronouns as subjects even when they are not marked for nominative case, so it would not be able to explain this for OVE either. Nor would Henry’s treatment of BE predict OVE’s acceptability with polar questions, since BE singular concord does not allow this. Neither would it account for OVE singular concord only occurring with finite *be*, since BE singular concord can occur with all lexical verbs.

5.3 An Account of OVE Singular Concord

Since neither the Arabic explanation nor the Belfast English explanation can fully account for the facts of OVE singular concord, something more is required. OVE singular concord patterns with other varieties of singular concord in that the verb is always in what seems like 3sg agreement, can occur across tenses, in wh-questions, and in both active and passive sentences, and cannot occur with overtly nominative or the 1sg and 3sg pronouns as subjects. OVE differs from other varieties of singular concord in that it only occurs with *be*, and it can occur with the 2sg subject. It differs from BE singular concord specifically in that it allows for polar questions.

this is evidenced by the fact that singular concord verb agreement is the 'default' agreement and that subjects may not be overtly nominative.

For OVE singular concord, we can apply Mohammad's treatment of Arabic to a certain extent, taking from Mohammad the idea that the subject is not in its standard agreement position of AGR_SP. This is supported by the fact that OVE singular concord occurs with a) the verb agreement in its 'default' setting of 3sg, and b) the subjects in 'default' accusative case. These facts suggest that there is something about the OVE singular concord subject that keeps it from checking its features with the verb to get agreement, and from checking for nominative case, which is done by the subject's moving to the AGR_SP position.

We can also apply Henry's treatment of BE to OVE singular concord, but again only to a certain extent: placing the singular concord subject in SPEC/TP and allowing Tense to check for 'default' (accusative) case would explain where the singular concord subject is located, and why singular concord sentences do not allow for overtly nominative subjects – since Tense can only check for default case. Since the agreement is now set to 'default,' this also explains the reason the verb is in its 'default' (3sg) agreement form.

To explain OVE singular concord's restrictions on 1sg and 3sg subjects, its restriction to *be* only, and the acceptability of the 2sg subject and polar questions, we must look at OVE singular concord from a slightly different perspective than has been previously done.

In OVE, singular concord cannot be employed with NPs, single or conjoined, where there is overt nominative marking. Thus the following sentences are ungrammatical:

40. a. *They **is** cleaning the stables.
'They are cleaning the stables.'

b. *George and I **was** fishing.
'George and I were fishing.'

Conversely, subjects that are not marked for nominative are perfectly acceptable. This includes accusative-marked, and ambiguous NPs:

41. a. Them **is** cleaning the stables.
‘They are cleaning the stables.’

b. George and me **was** fishing.
‘George and I were fishing.’

42. a. They bark.

In this sentence we have Tense (henceforth T) which comes with an interpretable feature, [tense:pres], and three uninterpretable features, [*u*case:nom], [*u*pers:], and [*u*num:]. We also have *they*, which for now we will call *pronoun*, which comes with [num:pl], [pers:-][3], and [*u*case:]. There is also *bark*, which is just [V]. The case feature of *pronoun* is unvalued, and so are the person and number features on T. *Bark* and *pronoun* both begin in VP, and T is the head of TP. There will be a checking relation between T and *pronoun* when *pronoun* moves to the SPEC/TP position. Because of this relation, T's unvalued number feature becomes [num:pl] and the person feature becomes [pers:-] thanks to *pronoun*, and *pronoun*'s unvalued case feature becomes nominative thanks to T. The resulting surface form is sentence 32. Let us look at an OVE standard agreement sentence and compare it to an OVE singular concord sentence:

43. a. They **are** hungry.

b. Them **is** hungry.
'They are hungry.'

In 33a we have T, *they*, and *hungry*. The features of *hungry* are not relevant for the purposes of this analysis, and so we will move on to T and *they*. If we use the Adger & Smith example as a template, *they* should have [*u*case:, pers:-, num:pl], and should instead be called *pronoun.* T should have [tense:pres, *u*case:nom, *u*pers:, *u*num:]. The result is that *pronoun* will get nominative case from T, and T will get number and person specifications from *pronoun*, and the sentence will appear in spell-out as 33a.

The singular concord version is much more interesting: given the OVE evidence, it appears that OVE singular concord *be* has different features from standard agreement *be*. Singular concord *be*, which we will call Aux (for auxiliary), should look like this in the present tense: [tense:pres, *u*num:pl]. Then, as in 33b, we combine it with *pronoun*, which

[3]

has [*u*case:, pers:-, num:pl]. Since there is no case specified, the only way for *pronoun* to appear in spell-out is in default case, which is the accusative in English. Since there is no person feature in Aux, verb agreement will default to third person in spell-out. Its number feature means that it can only occur with plural NPs, otherwise there will be no spell-out. To explain OVE singular concord's acceptability with the 2sg pronoun *you*, we will say that its features are [*u*case:, pers:2, num:unspecified], since it can be used as both 2sg and 2pl. In this way, it is syntactically interpreted by Aux as acceptable and spell-out can be achieved.[4] Because standard agreement *be* and Aux have the same interpretable features, their semantic content remains the same, but their spell-out differs due to the effects of their uninterpretable features. To explain OVE's acceptability with polar questions, we can just say that the features are strong enough in singular concord, as they are in standard agreement, to make the move to C^0 just like wh-questions can do. OVE singular concord would not work for other verbs because they are lexical verbs with lexical feature content, while *be* is not.

In summary, by defining singular concord *be* as having different uninterpretable features than standard agreement *be*

usages and across tenses, and allows only for subjects that are not overtly marked for nominative case, and does not allow the 1sg or 3sg pronoun as subjects regardless of case marking. OVE singular concord is acceptable in active and passive voice, and in polar and wh-questions, and is unacceptable when there is an adverb between the subject and the verb.

To account for these facts, we have borrowed from Mohammad's (1989) treatment of non-standard verbal agreement in Arabic to say that the subject of singular concord in OVE does not appear to be in the same position as standard agreement subjects – that is, it cannot be in a position to be checked for nominative case. We have also borrowed from Henry's (1995) treatment of BE singular concord to say that the OVE singular concord subject can only be checked for 'default' (accusative) case, and that the verb, therefore, can only have 'default' 3sg agreement. Finally, Adger and Smith's (2010) feature content framework was used to explain the underspecified features of the OVE singular concord *be* as compared to standard agreement *be*, which accounts for OVE singular concord's characteristics in terms of nominative subject restrictions, lexical verb restrictions, and the acceptability of the 2sg subject and unacceptability of the 1 and 3sg subject.

The facts of OVE singular concord can tell us a great deal about the nature of the phenomenon in OVE itself as well as in other languages and English dialects. It is clear from OVE that the singular concord phenomenon can take many different forms in many different languages; there is no canonical form of singular concord that exists across languages – or even across English dialects, despite their having evolved from the same beginnings. Indeed, it would seem that there is a whole family of singular concord phenomena, each unique to its own language and dialect.

There are many questions left unanswered by the limitations of this paper, including more details about the feature content of other verbs and pronouns in OVE. There is also the question of the nature of singular concord as a family of syntactic phenomena, and the nature of singular concord in other English dialects. Finally, there are many other syntactic phenomena that exist in OVE, such as historical present, which have not be explored at all

in this paper and which may be able to shed some light on the singular concord phenomenon as it occurs in OVE and in other dialects of English.

Ottawa Valley English is a rich dialect, and the study of Canadian English, Englishes around the world, and Linguistics as a discipline would benefit greatly from further research into the morphology and syntax of Ottawa Valley English. A full account of OVE morphosyntax cannot be accomplished in a single paper, and there remains a great deal left to be studied.

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