Number matching under ellipsis: Assumed identity contexts

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This talk investigates (mis)matching of φ-features under nominal ellipsis in copular clause contexts. Ellipsis structures are widely agreed to be subject to an identity condition between the elided structure and its antecedent. Early generalizations suggested that inflectional features like φ-features never needed to be matched in elided structures (Chomsky 1965), as shown in (1).
(1) a. John and Mary are violinists and Bill is [a violinist] too.
    b. Bill is a violinist and John and Mary are [violinists] too.
        Later studies pointed to the existence of asymmetries between gender and number features with respect to (mis)matching requirements (Giannikadou&Stavrou 1999, Depiante&Masullo 2003), suggesting that only number was a syntactic inflectional feature. More recent work has shown further splits relating to gender features (Bobaljik&Zocca 2011, Merchant 2014, Sudo&Spathas 2016), the emerging picture being that noun classes differ with respect to whether gender is intrinsically specified or syntactically valued, with matching under ellipsis only required in the intrinsic cases. What all these stages share in common is the idea that syntactically valued features are not relevant to the evaluation of identity (but see Saab 2016).
        In this talk we reconsider this idea. Our focus is on number (mis)match under ellipsis, which we consider in a new context: copular clauses with assumed identity readings where the identity of the copular complement is asserted to characterize the subject. We show that the very same nouns which allow mismatching of φ-features in predicational contexts such as (1) will have obligatory matching in assumed identity contexts. In order to set up examples parallel to the ones given above, we need to establish a context which is amenable to such a reading. A natural example for such a context is one where a number of individuals (John, Mary. Bill, so on) are puppeteers in a puppet show and the puppets are musicians in an orchestra. Some examples are given in (2). Note that in these examples, the subject and the nominal complement of the copular clauses do not need to match in number (2c, 2d).
(2) a. John is the violinist. (There is one violinist puppet that John controls)
 b. John and Mary are the violinists. (There are two violinist puppets, John is one, Mary is one.)
 c. John is the violinists. (There are two violinist puppets, John controls both of them.)
 d. John and Mary are the violinist. (There is one giant violinist puppet that both J. & M. control.)
Crucially, if we set up ellipsis examples based on (2), no mismatch is allowed (3), contrary to (1). It is important to assess these examples in the assumed identity (puppet show) context only.
(3) a. John is the violinist and Mary and Bill are [the violinist / # the violinists] too. (perhaps on different days or one in the morning, the other in the afternoon, so on.)
b. John and Mary are the violinists and Bill is [# the violinist / the violinists] too.
        Note that the same pattern persists if we replace the definite noun phrase in (3) with an indefinite one, suggesting that what is crucially at stake is obligatory number matching and not something beyond phi-features, such as referential identity. This is shown in (4). Here, we can think of a puppet orchestra with several violinist puppets.
(4)   John is a violinist and Bill and Mary are [a violinist / # violinists] too.
        We have shown in (3)-(4) that the φ-feature mismatching cases under ellipsis are
        We argue that the pattern in (3)-(4) results from the fact that the D head of the copular complement in assumed identity contexts enters the larger derivation with valued φ-features. On

standard assumptions, these features are syntactically valued. Thus, this novel case of number matching under ellipsis shows that a simple division between syntactic and intrinsic features cannot account for the full range of matching patterns and obligatory matching can arise even with syntactic valuation of these features.

References:

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