Agreement and government in adjective attribution marking

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The aim of this paper is to discuss a possible gap in the inventories of morpho-syntactic features relevant for the syntax of adjective attribution.

According to Kibort (2008) morpho-syntactic features (or "categories") are defined as features relevant to syntax by being involved in either syntactic agreement or government. Both agreement and government require a syntactic constituent as trigger/governor and another constituent as target/governee of morpho-syntactic marking: in the Bulgarian example below the head noun marked for certain gender and number values triggers gender and number agreement on the modifier.

(1) BULGARIAN (S-Slavic < Indoeuropean)

    a. Attributive agreement

       krasiv-o   sel-o
       pretty-**N.SG** village-**N.SG**

       'a pretty village'

    b. Predicative agreement

       tova sel-o   e **krasiv-o**
       this village-**N.SG** is pretty-**N.SG**

       'this village is pretty'

However, instances of morpho-syntactic marking governed not by constituents but by the syntactic structure have not been included in the typology of morpho-syntactic features. A prototypical example of morpho-syntactic marking without a triggering/governing constituent is attributive construct state marking in Persian. The trigger of the head-marking attributive suffix (aka "Ezafe") in Persian is the syntactic configuration. Its lone function is the licensing of constituency; semantic values are not assigned.

(2) PERSIAN (SW-Iranian < Indoeuropean)

    a. Attributive (aka "construct") state (on-head)

       xane-**ye**   **bozorg**
       house-**ATTR** big

       'a large house'

    b. Predicative (aka "absolute") state

       in   xane   **bozorg** ast
       DEM house(**PRED**) big   is

       'this house is large'

Purely morpho-syntactic government of the Persian type (ie not interfacing with semantics) can be labelled *attributive state*. The term *state* here is adapted from Mel'čuk (2006: 114–116) who defines it as an inflectional category of nouns heading a noun phrase. According to Mel'čuk, the function of morphological state marking is licensing the syntactic relationship between the phrase constituents. In the case of head-marking state, as in Persian, the head noun is inflected and shows the morphological value [+*attributive*] if it is the governing member in the syntactic relation (ie the noun phrase). Although the use of attributive versus predicative adjectives can be semantically determined, this distinction is pragmatic rather than syntactic. It is always the same syntactic configuration which is marked by either attributive or predicative state of the noun.

Several languages exhibit attributive construct state marking similar to Persian but with different loci: in Skolt Saami some adjectives are obligatorily inflected for attributive state if they are used as modifiers of a noun. Although attributive state marking in Skolt Saami is restricted to one (lexically defined) subclass of adjectives, in the same syntactic configuration (ie the noun phrase) these adjectives are always marked for attribution.

(3) SKOLT SAAMI (E-Saamic < Uralic)

    a. Attributive state (on-dependent)

       moo´žž-e´s põrtt
       pretty-ATTR   house

       'a pretty house'

    b. Predicative state

       taht põrtt lij **moočč-âd**
       this house is pretty-PRED

       'this house is pretty'

Finally, Russian exhibits morphosyntactic marking which combines attributive construct marking (of the Skolt Saami type) with head-driven agreement (of the Bulgarian type) because attributive adjectives are obligatorily marked with the so-called "long agreement inflection".

(4) RUSSIAN (E-Slavic < Indoeuropean)

    a. Attributive (aka "long form") agreement

       i. **krasiv-oje**   sel-o
        pretty-ATTR:N.SG village-N.SG

        'a pretty village'

       ii. ėto sel-o   **krasiv-oje**
        this village-N.SG pretty-ATTR:N.SG

        'this village is (a) pretty (one)'

    b. Predicative (aka "short form") agreement

       ėto sel-o   **krasiv-o**
       this village-N.SG pretty-PRED:N.SG

       'this village is pretty'

Although in Russian attributive agreement is also commonly used in predication (where the distinction between the two types is indeed semantically driven) it is obligatory with attributive adjectives. It is thus the syntactic configuration (ie the noun phrase) alone which requires attributive ("long") agreement. Consequently the morpho-syntax of attributive adjectives in Russian is different from Bulgarian and includes both the values of agreement categories and the feature STATE.

This paper provides further cross-linguistic evidence for purely syntactically governed adjective attribution marking devices which have not been considered in earlier ontologies of morpho-syntactic features. I argue that the feature STATE is relevant for the structure of nominal phrases even beyond adjective attribution because in several languages state markers license modification of different kinds of nominal or adpositional heads without the involvement of case or other semantic values.

References

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