

Asymmetries between person and number in syntax: A commentary on Baker's SCOPA

Omer Preminger

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This paper is a commentary on Baker's "When Agreement is for Number and Gender but not Person". In many contexts, the behavior of person agreement departs from that of number and/or gender agreement; the central hypothesis advanced by Baker—the *Structural Condition on Person Agreement* (or SCOPA)—is an attempt to derive these departures from a single, structural condition on the application of person agreement.

In this commentary, I explore Basque data that counter-exemplifies SCOPA, as well as a handful of other empirical patterns that SCOPA fails to address, but which I believe should be treated as part of the same empirical landscape. But far from condemning SCOPA, I believe these additional patterns may provide us with hints regarding how SCOPA (with its considerable empirical coverage), as well as its exceptions, are to be derived.

1. The unequivocally syntactic nature of agreement restrictions

A crucial component of Baker's account is that restrictions on person agreement are of a deeply syntactic source—and that a morphologically-based approach to the same facts is at best unexplanatory, and in many cases simply untenable. The latter can be seen when a particular combination of agreement morphemes is prohibited from arising in a given syntactic context, but can be shown to exist happily elsewhere in the language (and is therefore presumably well-formed, from a morphological perspective). Cases of this sort discussed in Baker's paper include: agreement with *wh*-operators in non-standard English dialects; agreement with non-subject nominatives in Icelandic; agreement with complements of gerundive verbs in Loka; and partial agreement with raised embedded subjects in Sakha.

To these I wish to add one more case, due to Albizu (1997) and Rezac (2008), involving *applicative unaccusatives* in Basque. I add it here not because Baker's examples fail to make the point, but because it is (in my mind) the most striking illustration of the inadequacy of morphological accounts of person restrictions—and as such, belongs in the discussion—and because it forms the baseline for the examination of Basque in the next two sections.

The term *applicative unaccusatives* refers to verbs that take two internal arguments, but no external argument. These verbs come in two types in Basque: one type in which the dative argument is structurally higher than the absolutive one, and another type in which these hierarchical relations are reversed. Crucially, the latter option arises in Basque only with applicative unaccusatives, never with true (triadic) ditransitives (Rezac 2008:72; see also Elordieta 2001).

Rezac provides a battery of diagnostics to determine whether a given applicative unaccusative is a *dative-over-absolutive* verb or an *absolutive-over-dative* verb (see, in particular, Rezac 2008:74–77). Using these diagnostics, the verb *gusta* "like" in Basque can be shown to be a dative-over-absolutive verb; as such, it obeys the Person Case Constraint (or PCC): the

*Thanks to Mark Baker, Marcel Den Dikken, and Maria Polinsky, for discussion and comments. They should not be held responsible for the views put forth in this paper, nor for any errors contained in it.

absolutive argument of *gusta* must be 3rd-person, as in (1a)—and cannot be 1st/2nd-person, as shown in (1b).¹

- (1) a. Miren-i gozoki-ak gusta-tzen ϕ -zai-zki-o.
 Miren-DAT sweet-ART_{pl}(ABS) like-IMPF 3.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{ }}$ -pl.ABS-3sg.DAT
 ‘Miren likes candy.’
- b. */?? Ni Miren-i gusta-tzen na-tzai- ϕ -o.
 me(ABS) Miren-DAT like-IMPF 1.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{ }}$ -sg.ABS-3sg.DAT
 ‘Miren likes me.’ [Albizu 1997:21, Rezac 2003:73]

Crucially, the very same auxiliary form that is impossible in (1b) can be used felicitously with an absolutive-over-dative verb, where it successfully expresses the very same ϕ -feature combination that it fails to express in (1b):

- (2) Ni Peru-ri hurbildu na-tzai- ϕ -o.
 me(ABS) Peru-DAT approach 1.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{ }}$ -sg.ABS-3sg.DAT
 ‘I approached Peru.’ [Rezac 2008:73]

The fact that the very same auxiliary that is ruled out by the PCC in (1b) can be used felicitously in (2) all but eliminates any possibility of accounting for the PCC as a morphological filter (cf. Bonet 1991, 1994).

It is worth contrasting this pattern with the Nahuatl data discussed by Baker. In Nahuatl, the person agreement morphology controlled by the Patient in a mono-transitive is obligatorily controlled by the indirect object in a ditransitive. This is what Dryer (1986) originally called primary-/secondary-object behavior—actually a sub-case of the more general phenomenon of agreement displacement (Rezac 2008). What Baker takes as evidence of an agreement restriction in Nahuatl is the number morpheme *-im-*, which exhibits omnivorous agreement (Nevins 2011; see also Preminger 2011): it can be triggered by plurality of *either* of the internal arguments, Source/Goal or Patient (Baker 2011:fn. 6). This *-im-* morpheme is also present in mono-transitives, as the number-component of standard object agreement, where its omnivorous nature is of course vacuous (given that there is only one potential agreement target in its domain).

It seems to me, then, that the following alternative characterization of the Nahuatl facts is possible: there is exactly one person probe and one number probe for VP-internal arguments of active verbs, and the number probe (unlike the person probe) is able to reach the lower of the two agreement targets. This certainly begs the question of why it would be this way and not the opposite (i.e., a conservative number probe coupled with an omnivorous person probe). One answer can be found in Nevins’ (2011) work on asymmetries between person and number agreement, while in §2, I provide an alternative way of deriving the directionality of this asymmetry.

Crucially, if this is the true nature of *-im-*, then Nahuatl ditransitives do not constitute an instance of partial agreement, after all: both ditransitives and mono-transitives take one set of agreement morphemes reflecting the person and number features of the subject, an

¹Phonologically null members of an agreement paradigm are marked by ‘ ϕ ’; the symbol ‘ $\sqrt{\text{ }}$ ’ in glosses of Basque stands for the auxiliary root (**edun(ukan)* “have” or *izan* “be”).

agreement morpheme reflecting the person features of the highest argument in the VP, and a number morpheme triggered by any VP-internal plural argument (if there is one). If this is correct, there is nothing partial about the agreement patterns that one observes in Nahuatl ditransitives, in the first place.

In contrast, the Basque case provides us with an adequate control (compare (1b) and (2)), demonstrating that full person and number agreement with both the dative and absolutive arguments is in principle possible.

2. The need to weaken SCOPA, and how the weaker alternative might be derived

Baker’s proposal centers around SCOPA, given in (3):

- (3) STRUCTURAL CONDITION ON PERSON AGREEMENT (SCOPA)
 A category F can bear the features +1 or +2 **if and only if** a projection of F merges with a phrase that has that feature and F is taken as the label of the resulting phrase.

The central intuition behind SCOPA is that agreement in person features (at least non-3rd-person ones) cannot take place *at a distance*: the agreed-with nominal must be a specifier or complement of the agreeing head.

In §2.1, I present evidence for person agreement at a distance, suggesting that SCOPA is overly restrictive. Baker (2008:112) characterizes person agreement as “fragile”, and thus unable to apply at a distance; these data suggest that this “fragility” is not absolute.

In §2.2, I consider the fact that number agreement at a distance is also “fragile” (albeit less so than person agreement). While not straightforwardly problematic for SCOPA (which says nothing about number agreement), this suggests a need for a unified account of both effects. The weakened SCOPA made necessary by §2.1, I propose, is part of a broader implicational relationship between person and number agreement—one that can be derived from the locus of person and number φ -probes in the clausal spine.

In §2.3, I explore how this revised system might account for adjectival agreement.

2.1. Successful person agreement at a distance

In Preminger 2009, I examined a set of long-distance agreement (or LDA) constructions in “substandard” Basque, first discussed from a generative perspective by Etxepare (2006). Importantly for our current purposes, one of these constructions—which I have unimaginatively dubbed the “adpositional construction”—exhibits bona fide person agreement at a distance. Consider the following example:

- (4) Ni altxa-tze-n probatu [na- ϕ -u-te]_{aux}.
 me(ABS) lift-NMZ-LOC attempted 1.ABS-sg.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{V}}$ -3pl.ERG
 ‘They attempted to lift me.’
 (subject is *pro*<3pl.ERG>) [Preminger 2009:627]

In this example, the 1st-person absolutive marker on the matrix auxiliary (*na-*) is determined by the 1st-person absolutive argument *ni* of the embedded predicate *altxa* “lift”.

Obviously, from the perspective of SCOPA, the crucial question is whether *ni* has remained within the embedded nominalized clause—in which case (4) constitutes an instance of person agreement at a distance, counter-exemplifying SCOPA—or whether it has moved out of the embedded nominalized clause, (re-)merging with the projection responsible for absolutive agreement (for instance, as a left-hand specifier of *vP*).²

To some extent, this is a difficult question to answer in Basque, since Basque has relatively unrestricted scrambling, often obscuring the syntactic configuration relevant to A-syntax (i.e., case and φ -agreement). Fortunately, however, there is a way to show that the downstairs absolutive argument in a construction like (4) remains within the embedded domain. As demonstrated in detail in Preminger 2009, dative nominals that have not undergone clitic-doubling (i.e., dative nominals for which there is no corresponding dative agreement morphology on an auxiliary or finite verb) will intervene in Basque, disrupting absolutive agreement. Crucially, embedding a ditransitive verb in the adpositional construction triggers such intervention, disrupting agreement with the embedded absolutive Patient; compare (5) with (6), in which the benefactive PP *Miren-entzat* “Miren-BEN” has been replaced with a dative nominal, *lankide-e-i* “colleague(s)-ART_{pl}-DAT”:

- (5) [[**Miren-entzat**]_{PP} [**harri horiek**]_(ABS) *altxa-tze-n*] *probatu*
Miren-BEN **stone(s) those_{pl}** *lift-NMZ-LOC* attempted
 [d-it-u-zte]_{aux}.
 3.ABS-**pl**.ABS-√-3pl.ERG
 ‘They have attempted to lift those stones for Miren.’
 (subject is *pro*<3pl.ERG>)
- (6) [[**Lankide-e-i**]_{DAT} [**liburu horiek**]_(ABS) *irakur-tze-n*] *probatu*
colleague(s)-ART_{pl}-DAT **book(s) those_{pl}** *read-NMZ-LOC* attempted
 [d-φ/*it-u-(z)te]_{aux}.
 3.ABS-**sg**/***pl**.ABS-√-3pl.ERG
 ‘They have attempted to read those books to the colleagues.’
 (subject is *pro*<3pl.ERG>) [Preminger 2009:640–641]

If it were possible for the absolutive argument to move out of the embedded nominalized clause within the A-syntax (i.e., before scrambling/A-bar movement has occurred), we would falsely predict plural absolutive agreement to be possible in (6), on a par with (4).

We might consider the possibility that the downstairs absolutive argument can A-move out of the embedded nominalized clause when there is no dative co-argument (as in (4–5)), but not when there is one (as in (6)). However, under the fairly standard assumption that unselected modifiers do not move as freely as arguments do, the order of constituents in (5) suggests that no such movement has occurred, since the downstairs absolutive is situated between the benefactive PP (a modifier of the embedded clause) and the embedded verb *altxa* “lift”. Thus, the availability of agreement with the embedded absolutive argument in the adpositional construction does not seem to be a result of A-movement of this argument. Assuming that such A-movement has taken place in (4) would thus be *ad hoc*.

²Note that case considerations do not bear directly on this issue: though the subject of (6) is ergative (as can be discerned from the agreement morphology on the auxiliary), ergative case can arise in Basque in the absence of an absolutive case-competitor (Preminger 2009, 2012).

I therefore conclude that in the adpositional construction, the downstairs absolutive argument remains *in situ* (or at least, within the embedded nominalized clause)—and in turn, that this construction (in particular, (4)) instantiates long-distance person agreement, counter-exemplifying SCOPA.

2.2. An implicational relation between *person* and *number*

The contrast between the Basque (5) and (6), above, illustrates that number agreement at a distance is also “fragile”—just like person agreement at a distance; in particular, it is susceptible to intervention by dative nominals. The same has been shown for agreement in the Icelandic Experiencer ECM construction (see Holmberg & Hróarsdóttir 2003, Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008).

This is not straightforwardly a problem for SCOPA, since SCOPA does not aim to regulate the distribution of successful number agreement; but SCOPA, in its original form, obscures what I take to be a rather important parallel between number and person agreement: *both* are more apt to fail at a distance than they are at close range. Adopting SCOPA renders this parallel a coincidence. Given the results of §2.1, which already necessitate some modification of SCOPA, let us reevaluate the empirical picture at hand.

There appears to be a “hierarchy of fragility”: person agreement is the likeliest to fail; but number agreement—albeit more rarely—is also prone to fail, when applying at a distance; finally, neither kind of agreement is prone to fail when it applies at close range (i.e., under direct merger between the agreeing head and the agreed-with argument, whether by base-generation or by movement; SCOPA captures this with respect to person agreement, but to the best of my knowledge it is true of number agreement, as well).³ We might therefore replace SCOPA with a relative notion, as shown in (7):

- (7) RELATIVE APTITUDE FOR FAILED AGREEMENT (RAFA)
 person at-a-distance \gg number at-a-distance (\gg any agreement at close range)

The state of affairs represented by (7) is reminiscent of various markedness hierarchies routinely employed in some modes of grammatical description. Interestingly, the analogy with markedness hierarchies might go one step further; markedness is usually taken to regulate not only the cross-linguistic distribution of various linguistic properties, but to impose per-language (or even per-construction) implicational relations between those properties (e.g., /d/ is typologically more common than /g/; but moreover, within a given language, the phonemic inventory will only include /g/ if it also includes /d/).

Let us refer to the morphosyntactic complex consisting of a verb or tense/aspect-marker and its associated agreement morphology as α , and the putative agreement target as β :

- (8) [agr./tense/asp./verb] $_{\alpha}$... [DP] $_{\beta}$

Generalizing from the cases that Baker discusses (in the paper and in Baker 2008)—as well as the Basque data discussed by Albizu (1997) and Rezac (2008), and in Preminger 2009, and the Icelandic Experiencer ECM data discussed by Holmberg & Hróarsdóttir (2003) and Sigurðsson & Holmberg (2008)—it seems to me that (7) also holds within a given utterance: if

³I abstract away from gender, for the purposes of the current discussion.

number agreement between α and β has been disrupted, person agreement between α and β is disrupted, as well.

(9) *number agr. between $\langle \alpha, \beta \rangle$ disrupted \implies person agr. between $\langle \alpha, \beta \rangle$ disrupted*

On the other hand (and as the formulation of (7) suggests), the converse does not hold. For example, Nevins (2011) shows that while many languages exhibit some form of the Person Case Constraint—a restriction on person agreement that is largely blind to number (§1)—no language seems to have the logically parallel “Number Case Constraint”, which would affect number agreement but be person-blind. In other words, person agreement between α and β can be disrupted in an utterance where number agreement between α and β still goes through.

(10) *person agr. between $\langle \alpha, \beta \rangle$ disrupted $\not\Rightarrow$ number agr. between $\langle \alpha, \beta \rangle$ disrupted*

To be clear, “disrupted” here refers to scenarios where β is 1st/2nd-person and/or plural, and yet α fails to exhibit the typical morphology associated with these features. It is not completely clear whether such a thing as “agreement with a 3rd-person/singular nominal” even exists, or these are descriptive terms that simply identify the morphology that surfaces when probes fail to find a target bearing marked features (see Nevins 2007, Preminger 2011 for somewhat dissenting views).

Of course, we should not be satisfied with (7) (and its corollaries, (9–10)); in particular, we should ask ourselves why it is that the varying “fragilities” of person and number agreement are structure-dependent in the way that they are—in that they go away when agreement is at close range.

I suggest that we can make sense of this in light of recent developments in the syntactic treatment of φ -agreement. Though the idea goes back as far as Shlonsky 1989, recent years have seen a considerable accumulation of support for the idea that what we might think of as a “ φ -feature bundle” does not behave as an atomic unit in syntax—and that instead, number features and person features probe separately from one another. Examples include Anagnostopoulou 2003, Béjar 2003, Chomsky 2000, Laka 1993, Preminger 2011, Sigurðsson 1996, Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008, Taraldsen 1995, and others.

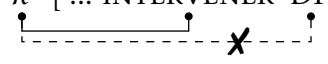
While not all the authors cited above opt for this implementation, one way to make sense of this separability of person and number is by assuming that the relevant φ -probes are simply situated in different syntactic positions; let us use π^0 as the label for whichever head probes for person features, and $\#^0$ for whichever head probes for number features. Once we adopt this view, considerations of cyclicity entail that whichever of these two heads is merged first will probe immediately (and before the other is merged), and thus person and number features will probe in separate derivational steps.

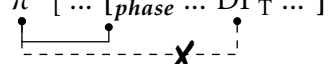
Now let us return to the “hierarchy of fragility”, in (7) above. I propose that it arises as a reflection of the way π^0 and $\#^0$ are arranged in the syntax—and in particular, because $\#^0$ and π^0 are consecutive heads in the functional spine:

(11) [... [_{#P} $\#^0$ [_{π P} π^0 [... DP_T ...]]] ...] (where DP_T is a putative agreement target)

If something disrupts the relation between $\#^0$ and DP_T—for example, an intervening dative nominal (as in (12a)), or a phasal category (as in (12b))—then it necessarily also intervenes in the relation between π^0 and DP_T. The reason is that there is no structural space in between

$\#^0$ and π^0 (the former immediately c-commanding the latter) for the intervener, and therefore the intervener must be between π^0 and DP_T , as well:

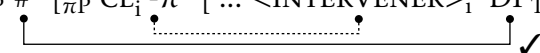
- (12) a. [... [$\#_P$ $\#^0$ [π_P π^0 [... INTERVENER DP_T ...]]] ...]


 b. [... [$\#_P$ $\#^0$ [π_P π^0 [... [*phase* ... DP_T ...] ...]]] ...]


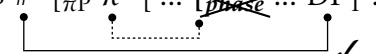
The one exception would be an intervener that is situated in [$Spec, \pi P$]; but if π^0 does not project arguments of its own, this intervener could not have been base-generated in [$Spec, \pi P$], meaning it would have to have moved there; and if it moved there, it would have to have been the closest possible mover; it would thus also intervene in φ -probing by π^0 itself.⁴

This captures the implication that disrupting number agreement cannot take place without also disrupting person agreement. Next, let us consider how the converse (and attested) scenario, where person agreement is disrupted but number agreement is successful—as in PCC cases, for example—would arise. Here, I follow the intuition put forth by Béjar & Rezac (2003): probing by π^0 , which fails to reach the putative agreement target DP_T and instead encounters an obstruction—the INTERVENER, in (12a), or the phasal category, in (12b)—can in some cases effectively remove this obstruction.

In Béjar & Rezac’s (2003) account of the PCC, the dative intervener undergoes clitic-doubling upon being probed by the person probe. Following Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1997), Anagnostopoulou (1994), Sportiche (1996, 1998), and others, a clitic-doubled noun phrase behaves like an A-trace (as evinced by its binding-theoretic behavior, for example; see Anagnostopoulou 2006 for a review). The clitic itself, on the other hand, is an X^0 category, and thus does not intervene in relations targeting phrasal categories (following Rizzi 1990 and many others). Thus, when $\#^0$ probes, it is able to reach the putative agreement target DP_T :

- (13) [... [$\#_P$ $\#^0$ [π_P CL_i^0 - π^0 [... <INTERVENER>_i DP_T ...]]] ...]


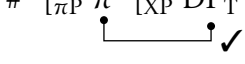
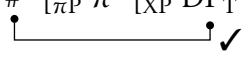
The same general logic, however, is applicable to the phasal scenario, in (12b): I assume that when a φ -probe targets a phasal category, that category ceases to behave as a locality boundary (following Rackowski & Richards 2005, who provide evidence for this effect from the overt morphosyntax of *wh*-movement in Tagalog). If so, the same general schema illustrated in (13) will apply to this case as well:

- (14) [... [$\#_P$ $\#^0$ [π_P π^0 [... [~~*phase*~~ ... DP_T ...] ...]]] ...]


⁴It is conceivable that one could get around this by appealing to finer derivational timing—i.e., that π^0 would dislocate the intervener *prior* to probing for person features (along the lines of Müller 2009, for example). I assume that if this option is available to π^0 , it is also available to $\#^0$ —and thus $\#^0$ would be able to move the intervener out of its [$Spec, \pi P$] position prior to probing for number features, meaning that this supposed intervener would not actually disrupt φ -probing by $\#^0$, either. I therefore do not consider this possibility problematic for the line of argumentation pursued in the text.

There are thus at least two ways in which number agreement between α and β can go through in a derivation where person agreement between α and β has been disrupted. It is conceivable, of course, that in a given construction, neither of these two ameliorations (i.e., (13) or (14))—nor any other type of amelioration—will take place. In this case, number agreement will fail just like person agreement (due to the same intervener, or phase-boundary, etc.)—a pattern which is of course also attested: dative intervention in the adpositional construction (§2.1), for example, affects person and number agreement equally. In that particular case, this is the result of the fact that clitic-doubling of the dative intervener cannot occur across a non-restructuring clausal boundary, even if it is non-finite (see Preminger 2009 for further discussion).

Finally, consider a scenario where agreement applies not at a distance, but at close range. Let us refer to the complement of π^0 as XP; if a nominal target has made it as far as [Spec,XP] (by movement, or by being base-generated there), then clearly nothing could impede agreement with this target: even if XP were a phasal category, its specifier would be accessible to probing from the outside. This is schematized below:

- (15) a. [... [_{#P} #⁰ [_{π P} π^0 [_{XP} DP_T [X' ...]]]]] ...]

 b. [... [_{#P} #⁰ [_{π P} π^0 [_{XP} DP_T [X' ...]]]]] ...]


We thus derive the fact that agreement at close range—whether in number or in person—is not “fragile” like its long-distance counterparts.

To summarize, the assumption that #⁰ and π^0 (the φ -probes for number and person, respectively) are consecutive heads along the clausal spine derives the implicational relationship between failed number agreement and failed person agreement, deriving both the “hierarchy of fragility” (in (7), above), and explaining why this “fragility” is dependent on structural distance in the way that it is.

2.3. Adjectival agreement

In the previous subsections, we have explored two challenges to SCOPA: the existence of person agreement at a distance, and the parallel vulnerability of person agreement and number agreement to disruption, when agreement relations obtain at a distance.

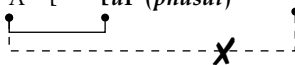
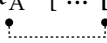
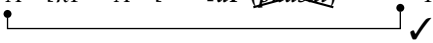
In §2.2, I suggested a mechanism by which a weaker version of SCOPA—one which addresses the relative “fragilities” of both person and number agreement—could be derived, based on the idea that person and number φ -probes are separate syntactic heads.

This leaves us with the issue of adjectival agreement, perhaps the most important empirical motivation for Baker’s proposal. As Baker shows, adjectival agreement systematically fails to express person distinctions. At the root of Baker’s treatment of this fact is the assumption that the subject of adjectival predication is always base-generated outside of the maximal projection of the adjective (notably unlike verbal predication, for example). Suppose we replace this assumption with the following: adjectives do conform to the Predicate-Internal Subject Hypothesis, but what is unique about them (relative to verbs, for example) is that they are enclosed in an EPP-less phasal category. Within the theory of category-neutral roots

(Marantz 1997, et seq.), adjectives would have to include an “adjectivizer” layer, which we can label *aP*; on this view, it is this *aP* that would be phasal and EPP-less (cf. the assumed properties of *vP*).

Holding constant the assumption—from Baker 2008 (see also Baker 2011:fn. 5)—that adjectival φ -probes are located outside of the adjectival projection proper, probing by adjectival π^0 would run into the phasal *aP*, preventing successful person agreement with the *aP*-internal subject, but “unlocking” the phasal boundary in the manner shown in (14), above. This has two important consequences: first, number (and gender) agreement with the *aP*-internal subject would then go through unimpeded, which is the correct result; second, movement out of *aP* would be possible, which—as illustrated by the existence of raising adjectives—is again the correct result.

This derivational sequence is schematized below:

- (16) a. [... [#_P #_A⁰ [_{π P} π _A⁰ [... [*aP* (*phasal*) ... DP_T ...] ...]]] ...]

 b. [... [#_P #_A⁰ [_{π P} π _A⁰ [... [*aP* (~~*phasal*~~) ... DP_T ...] ...]]] ...]

 c. [... [#_P #_A⁰ [_{π P} π _A⁰ [... [*aP* (~~*phasal*~~) ... DP_T ...] ...]]] ...]


The heads in question ($\#_A^0$, π_A^0 , and a^0 , as well as the root itself) would then be spelled out together, through the same mechanisms responsible for similar morpho-syntactic fusing in the verbal domain (e.g., head-movement).

Note also that this approach eliminates the need to assume that agreement heads probe downward in the verbal domain, but upward in the adjectival domain (a property required on Baker’s treatment of adjectival agreement, though Baker 2008 suggests a way in which it may be derived).

Looking at adjectival agreement alone, it is not clear that this analysis fares better than Baker’s SCOPA-based approach; but its existence is important, in light of the shortcomings of the original formulation of SCOPA, as detailed in §2.1–§2.2.

3. (In)effability and licensing

A basic observation regarding agreement restrictions is that they underdetermine the fate of the utterances to which they apply: if agreement with the full range of φ -features borne by a given nominal is ruled out, it may be the case that partial agreement is possible (e.g., agreement in number and gender but not in person, as in many of the cases discussed by Baker); it may be the case that a completely non-agreeing form is possible (i.e., agreement with none of the features of the nominal); and it may be the case that no alternative agreement morphology is available that would salvage the utterance.

We have already seen examples of all three kinds of behavior: the PCC effects discussed in §1 (exemplified by (1b)) rule out the offending structures entirely, regardless of the agreement morphology chosen; intervention in Basque LDA constructions yields invariant “default” or 3rd-person singular agreement morphology, but a grammatical utterance (as exemplified by

(6)); and finally, adjectival agreement yields agreement in number but not in person (see also the patterns of partial agreement in Sakha, discussed by Baker).

The question is then what determines which of these possible outcomes will arise in a given utterance, or in a given syntactic configuration. Baker explores an answer to this question in terms of Case Theory, based on the following principle:

- (17) F values the case feature of DP only if F agrees with all of DP's marked features.
[Baker 2011:(44)]

This principle is couched within a theory of case of the sort espoused by Chomsky (2000, 2001), where: (i) there is a Case Filter requiring DPs to receive case at some point in the derivation, and (ii) case is assigned to DPs through agreement with designated functional heads. Within such a theory, (17) has the effect of ruling out partial agreement of a head H^0 with a given DP unless that DP has a source of case other than H^0 itself.

There are two problems with this approach. First, I will present evidence from Kichean (Mayan) in §3.1 suggesting that marked number (i.e., plural) is not subject to the same kind of licensing condition that applies to marked person (i.e., 1st/2nd-person). More importantly, as I will show in §3.2, Basque furnishes an argument that ineffability of partial agreement cannot be reduced to a violation of the Case Filter.

In §3.3, I propose an alternative mechanism to derive the distribution of effability and ineffability, based on the locality of person licensing.

3.1. Marked number does not require licensing

The principle in (17) generalizes the behavior of marked person to marked number; but there is evidence suggesting that such a generalization does not hold. To see this, let us consider the behavior of the *Agent-Focus* construction in the Kichean languages of the Mayan family (Dayley 1978, 1985, Mondloch 1981, Norman & Campbell 1978, Smith-Stark 1978; and see Aissen 2011, Preminger 2011, Stiebels 2006 for recent analyses).

The Agent-Focus construction is used in these languages to circumvent a restriction preventing A-bar operations from targeting the ergative argument. While sometimes called the *Focus Antipassive* or *Agentive Antipassive*, the Agent-Focus construction is actually not an antipassive at all: neither the Agent nor the Patient is “demoted”, and both show up as regular, non-oblique DPs (Aissen 2011, Craig 1979, Smith-Stark 1978).

In terms of agreement, the Agent-Focus construction is characterized by having only one agreement slot, and employing agreement markers from the absolutive series (in contrast with regular transitives, which have separate ergative and absolutive agreement markers). Concentrating on singular arguments first, we find that the Agent-Focus verb agrees with whichever argument is non-3rd-person:

- (18) a. Ja rat x-at/* ϕ -axa-n ri achin. (Kaqchikel)
 FOC you(sg.) PRFV-2sg/*3sg.ABS-hear-AF the man
 ‘It was you(sg.) that heard the man.’
 b. Ja ri achin x-at/* ϕ -axa-n rat.
 FOC the man PRFV-2sg/*3sg.ABS-hear-AF you(sg.)
 ‘It was the man that heard you(sg.)’

It is impossible, in this construction, for both arguments to be non-3rd-person—regardless of the agreement morphology used:

- (19) a. * Ja rat x-**in/at/φ**-axa-n yin.
 FOC you(sg.) PRFV-**1sg/2sg/3sgABS**-hear-AF me
Intended: ‘It was you(sg.) that heard me.’
- b. * Ja yin x-**in/at/φ**-axa-n rat.
 FOC me PRFV-**1sg/2sg/3sgABS**-hear-AF you(sg.)
Intended: ‘It was me that heard you(sg.).’

This is precisely what (17) would lead us to expect: there is one agreement relation in the Agent-Focus construction; thus, whichever argument is agreed with, the marked features of the other will go unlicensed, yielding ungrammaticality.

At first glance, marked number appears to behave like marked person—if one of the arguments is plural, it will control agreement on the Agent-Focus verb:

- (20) a. Ja rje' x-**e/φ**-tz'et-ö rja'.
 FOC them PRFV-**3pl/*3sg.ABS**-see-AF him
 ‘It was them who saw him.’
- b. Ja rja' x-**e/φ**-tz'et-ö rje'.
 FOC him PRFV-**3pl/*3sg.ABS**-see-AF them
 ‘It was him who saw them.’

However, contra what (17) would lead us to expect, there is no impediment to having two plural arguments in the Agent-Focus construction, one of which is simply not targeted for agreement:

- (21) Ja röj x-**oj**-tz'et-ö rje'.
 FOC us PRFV-**1pl.ABS**-see-AF them
 ‘It was us who saw them.’

Looking at (21) alone, we could imagine that the plural object *rje'* “them”, which is not agreed with, is case-licensed in some other way—perhaps by a phonologically null adposition; but if such case-licensing were possible, we would falsely predict that the same case-licensing mechanism would salvage (19a–b), as well.

These data illustrate rather clearly, I think, that marked number is not subject to the same licensing conditions that apply to marked person; instead, there is what seems to be a *sui generis* licensing requirement on 1st/2nd-person. This is captured (if not explained) in Béjar & Rezac’s (2003) *Person Licensing Condition* (or PLC):

- (22) PERSON LICENSING CONDITION (PLC)
 Interpretable 1st/2nd-person features must be licensed by entering into an *Agree* relation with an appropriate functional category. [Béjar & Rezac 2003]

Interestingly—like Baker—Béjar & Rezac later attempt to expand this principle to cover any marked member of a φ -set (Béjar & Rezac 2009); the current data suggest that such a move may not be on the right track.

3.2. (In)effability of partial agreement does not reduce to the Case Filter

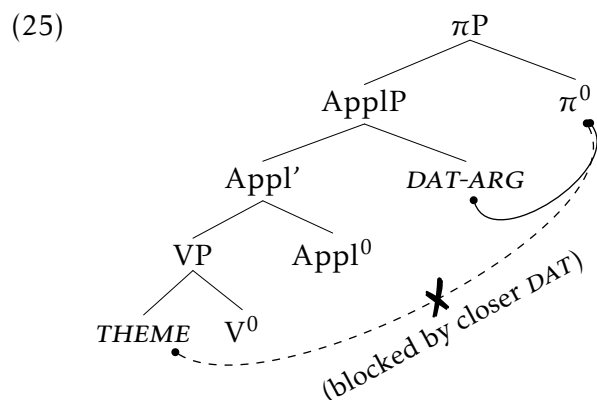
As illustrated in §1, PCC effects in Basque yield outright ungrammaticality (rather than tolerated partial agreement). On Baker’s account of ineffability, this means that absolutive case in Basque is not freely available case (or unmarked case, in Marantz’s 1991 terms), and is instead assigned through agreement—and so the disruption of person agreement with a 1st/2nd-person Patient yields a Case Filter violation, and hence ungrammaticality.

As noted by Laka (1993), however, PCC effects in Basque disappear in non-finite contexts; compare (23b), below, with the non-finite version of the same clause, in (24):

- (23) a. Zuk niri liburu-a saldu d-i- ϕ -da-zu.
 you.ERG me.DAT book-ART_{sg}(ABS) sold 3.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{sg}}$ -sg.ABS-1sg.DAT-2sg.ERG
 ‘You have sold the book to me.’
 b. * Zuk harakin-ari ni saldu n-(a)i- ϕ -o-zu.
 you.ERG butcher-ART_{sg}.DAT me(ABS) sold 1.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{sg}}$ -sg.ABS-3sg.DAT-2sg.ERG
 ‘You have sold me to the butcher.’

- (24) Gaizki iruditzen ϕ -zai- ϕ -t [zuk ni harakin-ari
 wrong look-IMPF 3.ABS- $\sqrt{\text{sg}}$ -sg.ABS-1sg.DAT you.ERG me(ABS) butcher-ART_{sg}.DAT
 saltzea].
 sold-NMZ-ART_{sg}(ABS)
 ‘It seems wrong to me for you to sell me to the butcher.’ [Laka 1996]

What are we to make of this, on the assumption that absolutive case in Basque arises through agreement? Recall from §1 that unlike applicative unaccusatives, true (triadic) ditransitives always adhere to a dative-over-absolutive structure in Basque (Rezac 2008:72; see also Elordieta 2001), and that datives in dative-over-absolutive constructions intervene in absolutive person agreement (Béjar & Rezac 2003, Preminger 2009, a.o.):



Recall furthermore, from §2.1, that the absolutive argument in an embedded nominalized clause in Basque remains *in situ* (or at least, below the dative Source/Goal argument)—as schematized in (25) (while the long-distance agreement effects discussed in §2.1 are restricted to “substandard” varieties of Basque, the behavior of those varieties with respect to the PCC is the same as Standard Basque, and so there is no internal inconsistency in combining both kinds of evidence).

The lack of PCC effects in (24) therefore means that the agreement probe that licenses absolutive case on *ni* “me(ABS)” must be located below the dative Source/Goal argument, as well—otherwise, it would be unable to agree in person with a 1st/2nd-person Patient, and the PCC would resurface.

We have now arrived at a contradiction: if the verb phrase in Basque can contain an agreement probe capable of licensing 1st/2nd-person features on an absolutive argument even in the presence of a dative Source/Goal, then it should be able to do so in finite clauses as well (since finiteness does not affect the innards of the verb phrase). This predicts that (23b) should not be an ineffable PCC violation—that it should be, at worst, grammatical with some form of partial or default agreement; but this is not the case. Indeed, the finite auxiliary form used by *Laka* in (23b) is hypothesized, since this utterance is ungrammatical with this or any other variation of the auxiliary.

I take these facts to show that absolutive case is freely available in Basque, and is not dependent on agreement with—or even the presence of—any particular functional node (in *Legate’s* 2008 terms: Basque is an ABS=DEF language). But this means that the ineffability of PCC violations in Basque can no longer be reduced to a Case Filter.

Even if “absolutive” actually conflates two categories—one freely-available default case, and another case that is assigned by agreement, if possible—the default flavor should be available to a noun phrase which has not been agreed with, meaning the Case Filter can no longer account for the ineffability of partial agreement in Basque.

As *Baker* is careful to point out, not all PCC effects fall under the rubric of “two-and-a-half agreement” per se; some involve clitics rather than “pure” agreement, and yet others involve phonologically-reduced pronouns in argument positions. In fact, recent analyses identify much of the finite agreement morphology in Basque as clitics, rather than “pure” agreement (*Arregi & Nevins* 2008, 2012, *Preminger* 2009). But given that the ineffability of Basque PCC effects requires an account one way or another, and that an account of this based on a Case Filter is untenable, we might as well try to extend whatever mechanism ends up being responsible for the effect in Basque to “pure” agreement contexts, as well (or else the overwhelming similarity between these two kinds of ineffability ends up being treated as a coincidence).

3.3. (In)effability of partial agreement might reduce to locality

I assume, following the results of §3.2, that Basque embedded nominalized clauses of the sort discussed here lack any absolutive φ -probe whatsoever (as their overt syntax suggests); and that this does not preclude absolutive case from appearing in such non-finite contexts, since absolutive case is not dependent on agreement.

Given the inadequacy of the Case Filter as an account of the ineffability of (23b), what are we to make of the contrast between (23b) and (24)? This contrast, it seems to me, is most easily handled in terms of locality: suppose that the PLC, contra the formulation in (22), only

inspects pairs of <1st/2nd-person pronoun, agreement probe> that are both located within a single clause (whether finite or non-finite).⁵ We can thus formulate a revised PLC, as in (26):

(26) PERSON LICENSING CONDITION (PLC) – REVISED VERSION

A 1st/2nd-person pronoun in the same clause as a person φ -probe must be agreed with by that φ -probe.

The locus of finite absolutive agreement in (23b) is within the same clause as the absolutive argument, and thus the PLC stands to be violated; but no φ -probe is close enough to the embedded absolutive argument in (24) to trigger a PLC violation.

On this view, φ -agreement can reach into domains that the PLC cannot inspect—in particular, φ -agreement can span the boundaries of certain non-finite clauses, which are impermeable to (26). We have already seen this to be true in Basque: absolutive arguments in embedded nominalized clauses like the one in (24), which never trigger PCC violations, can nevertheless be targeted for long-distance agreement—as shown in (4–5), for example.⁶

Icelandic provides additional support for this view, again from the distribution of effable and ineffable agreement restrictions. The evidence comes from the dialect identified by Sigurðsson & Holmberg (2008) as “Icelandic A”. In this dialect, verbs that take quirky dative subjects and nominative objects (such as *líka* “like”) cannot agree with their object if it is 1st/2nd-person:

⁵It is important to note that restructuring/“clause-union”—whatever its ultimate analysis—generates a structure that is syntactically mono-clausal. Thus, for example, constructions involving clitic-climbing in Romance are expected to trigger the PLC, since they will adhere to the clausemate condition. See Preminger 2009 for arguments that the Basque constructions discussed here are *not* instances of restructuring.

⁶While (26) is formulated in terms of *clauses*, there is at least one enticing reason to opt, instead, for a formulation in terms of *phases*. Consider a language like English, where there is overt agreement only with subjects, yet transitive objects can of course be 1st/2nd-person without impediment. On the clause-based formulation, such objects are in the same clause as the (subject) φ -probe, and thus should trigger a PLC violation, *contra* to fact. One way to preserve the clause-based formulation in the face of such data would be to assume phonologically undetectable object agreement in English; there are, however, typological reasons to reject such a move, which I discuss below in the context of PP-internal 1st/2nd-person pronouns.

The problem with a phase-based approach, on the other hand, should be clear from the text: even the boundaries of non-finite clauses, of the kind that is permeable to various syntactic processes, are significant for the PLC. Perhaps a solution can be found in Legate’s (2003) proposal that all instances of a phasal category like *vP*, even the so-called “weak” instances, are syntactically significant. Adopting such a view, of course, requires a more fine-grained account of why operations like long-distance agreement are still able to cross such phasal boundaries, while the PLC is not. Though this strikes me as the most promising avenue for resolving this issue, I am not comfortable deploying a definition of the PLC that is based on a non-standard conception of “phase”, without rigorously defining this alternative. I will therefore continue, in the current commentary, to use the clause-based formulation, leaving the precise resolution of this issue for future work.

- (27) a. * Honum líkum við.
 him.DAT like.1pl we.NOM
 b. * Honum líkið þið.
 him.DAT like.2pl you(pl).NOM
 c. Honum líka þeir.
 him.DAT like.3pl they.NOM
 ‘He likes them.’

[Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008:254]

Crucially, examples of the sort shown in (27a–b) are ineffable in Icelandic A; they do not improve when 3rd-person agreement morphology is used instead of a fully agreeing form (see Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008:255).

When the putative host of agreement (i.e., the finite verb or auxiliary) and the 1st/2nd-person nominative are not clausemates, full agreement (in person as well as number) is again ruled out, but the variant with a 3rd-person singular form of the verb becomes possible:

- (28) a. Honum mundi/*mundum virðast við vera hæfir.
 him.DAT would.3sg/*would.1pl seem we.NOM be competent
 ‘We would seem competent to him.’
 b. Honum mundi/*munduð virðast þið vera hæfir.
 him.DAT would.3sg/*would.2pl seem you(pl).NOM be competent
 ‘Y’all would seem competent to him.’
 c. Honum mundi/mundu virðast þeir vera hæfir.
 him.DAT would.3sg/would.3pl seem they.NOM be competent
 ‘They would seem competent to him.’

[Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008:255]

To highlight this difference in effability, Sigurðsson & Holmberg provide mono-clausal near-minimal pairs of (28a–c):

- (29) a. * Honum mundi hafa líkað við.
 him.DAT would.3sg have liked we.NOM
 b. * Honum mundi hafa líkað þið.
 him.DAT would.3sg have liked you(pl).NOM
 c. ? Honum mundi hafa líkað þeir.
 him.DAT would.3sg have liked they.NOM
 ‘He would have liked them.’

[Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008:255]

Again, we can make sense of this pattern in terms of the clause-bound PLC given in (26), above. The 1st/2nd-person nominative pronouns in (29a–b) are clausemates of the finite verb, and therefore subject to the PLC; this means that if their person features are not targeted by the φ -probe, a PLC violation will arise, resulting in ungrammaticality.

The 1st/2nd-person nominative pronouns in (29a–b), in contrast, are not clausemates of a φ -probe (since the embedded clause in these examples is non-finite), meaning a PLC violation cannot be triggered.

Finally, note that this approach might hold the key to solving another nagging problem with Béjar & Rezac’s (2003, 2009) PLC—or any other structural approach to person licensing, for that matter—which is that not just any occurrence of a 1st/2nd-person pronoun seems to require licensing by agreement. Consider examples of the following sort:

(30) John overheard them arguing near you.

It is obviously the case that some prepositions in some languages show overt signs of φ -agreement. We might therefore conjecture that the same is true, covertly, of English—that the preposition *near* in an example like (30) enters into a phonologically undetectable agreement relation with the 2nd-person pronoun:

(31) John overheard them arguing [_{PP} [_{P⁰} near] you]
•————•
(phonologically undetectable agreement)

The problem with such an approach is that it undoes a significant typological generalization. PCC effects (including their “two-and-a-half agreement” sub-case, addressed by Baker) are typically restricted to languages/constructions where one can observe at least some overt agreement with the arguments in question (cf. the absence of PCC in non-finite clauses in Basque; see the discussion of (24), above). If we allow ourselves to freely posit phonologically covert agreement relations, this generalization becomes a mystery (especially given that post-syntactic, morphologically-driven approaches to the PCC are untenable; see §1). The distribution of the PCC therefore requires somewhat of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get approach to agreement—that it is there when we can observe it, and likely not there when we cannot.

This way of thinking, however, renders the licensing of the 2nd-person pronoun *you* in (30) mysterious, from the perspective of the original PLC (given in (22), above)—since it is an instance of a 1st/2nd-person pronoun whose appearance is licit despite not entering into an agreement relation with an appropriate φ -probe.

The revised, clause-bound PLC given in (26) might provide the answer to this puzzle: if PPs are like clauses, for locality purposes (Abels 2003, Baltin 1978, Riemsdijk 1978, a.o.), then the 2nd-person pronoun in (30) is like the 1st/2nd-person pronouns embedded in a non-finite clause in Basque and Icelandic—there is no φ -probe close enough to it. As a result, no PLC violation involving this pronoun can arise.⁷

There is one case in Baker’s paper which seems, at first glance, problematic for this locality-based approach to (in)effability—namely, the case of Northern Ostyak, which seems to manifest effable partial agreement with the direct object of a decidedly mono-clausal transitive (namely, agreement with the object in number but not in person, even when the object is 1st/2nd-person).

⁷See Den Dikken (2010), Koopman (2000) and Svenonius (2010), among others, for further parallels between the extended structure of PPs and that of clauses.

Again, though, it seems to me that a what-you-see-is-what-you-get approach fares well here. Recall from §1 that Basque, where mono-clausal agreement restrictions are ineffable, provides us with language-internal evidence of the agreement restrictions in question. Specifically, looking at simple intransitives/mono-transitives, we can see that finite agreement morphology in Basque is capable of reflecting both the person and number features of the Patient; therefore, when in a given construction only the number features can be expressed, we can safely conclude that some sort of restriction is in effect.

There seems to me to be no language-internal morphological evidence of that sort for object agreement in Northern Ostyak (see also the brief discussion of Nahuatl, at the end of §1). It is therefore possible that no neutralization is taking place here, and that the object φ -probe seeks only number features, in the first place.

This approach to Northern Ostyak allows us to maintain the clause-bound PLC given in (26), which in turn, facilitates an account of (in)effability in Basque and Icelandic—patterns which could not be accounted for in terms of a Case Filter.

4. Summary

This commentary began, in §1, with a reaffirmation of the deeply syntactic nature of agreement restrictions (as argued by Baker), based on the work of Albizu (1997) and Rezac (2008).

In §2, we examined two challenges to Baker’s SCOPA. One was the existence of person agreement at a distance (§2.1), an illustration that the original formulation of SCOPA is too strong; the other was the similar “fragility” of number agreement and person agreement when they apply at a distance—a generalization obscured by SCOPA in its original form (§2.2).

This led to the formulation of RAFA, repeated here as (32):

- (32) RELATIVE APTITUDE FOR FAILED AGREEMENT (RAFA)
 person at-a-distance \gg number at-a-distance (\gg any agreement at close range) [= (7)]

This formalizes an implicational relation between the disruption of person agreement and number agreement, which I suggested holds even within a single construction. I then sketched, in §2.2, how such an implication could be derived from the syntactic locus of φ -probes—building on the assumption that person and number features probe separately from one another (Anagnostopoulou 2003, Béjar 2003, Chomsky 2000, Laka 1993, Preminger 2011, Shlonsky 1989, Sigurðsson 1996, Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008, Taraldsen 1995, a.o.); and in particular, that person probes (π^0) and number probes ($\#^0$) are consecutive heads along the clausal spine. The relevant structure is repeated here as (33):

- (33) [... [_{#P} $\#^0$ [_{π P} π^0 [... DP_T ...]]] ...] [= (11)]

The next issue examined was (in)effability: when it is that agreement restrictions can be repaired by partial agreement—or even “default” (3rd-person singular) agreement—and when it is that such repairs are unavailable. Baker suggests that the distribution of these different outcomes can be derived from the Case Filter, on the assumption that agreement with the marked members of any φ -set (1st/2nd-person, plural, etc.) is a precondition to case assignment.

In §3.1, I showed evidence from the Kichean languages (Mayan) that strongly suggests that the kind of licensing requirements routinely assumed for 1st/2nd-person (Béjar & Rezac’s 2003 PLC, for example) do not extend to marked number (namely, plural). More importantly, I presented an argument in §3.2 that the ineffability of Basque PCC violations (surveyed in §1) cannot be reduced to a Case Filter.

Building on this Basque data, and somewhat similar patterns from Icelandic (Holmberg & Hróarsdóttir 2003, Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008), I suggested in §3.3 an alternative means of deriving the distribution of (in)effability, based on locality. In particular, there appears to be some support for the notion that the aforementioned licensing conditions on 1st/2nd-person are only evaluated within the domain of a single clause—which might also explain why 1st/2nd-person pronouns do not require licensing by agreement when they are not in core argument positions.

The revised Person Licensing Condition (PLC) is repeated here as (34):

(34) PERSON LICENSING CONDITION (PLC) – REVISED VERSION

A 1st/2nd-person pronoun in the same clause as a person φ -probe must be agreed with
by that φ -probe. [=(26)]

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