Yale Linguistics Colloquia Series, Fall 2006

Speaker: Jim McCloskey, University of California, Santa Cruz
Title: The Morphosyntax of Agreement in Irish
Date: Tuesday, September 12, 2006
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Abstract:

I return in this paper to the analysis of the complex system of agreement in Irish – its analysis and the theoretical implications that flow from that analysis. The principal analytical challenges to be faced here are the following:

1. Agreement relations (which share a core set of properties) occur in five distinct syntactic configurations---involving subjects of finite clauses, possessors in nominal phrases, objects of prepositions, objects of nonfinite clauses, and objects in certain periphrastic aspect constructions. The analytical challenge is to build an understanding which successfully isolates what is common across these cases.

2. In these relations, there is a complex interaction with the syntax of coordination for which no satisfactory analysis has so far been constructed.

3. Person number inflection on a given head is incompatible with the independent expression of the corresponding argument.

The paper argues for an approach to this body of observation in which the phenomena in question do in fact reflect agreement relations (as opposed to incorporation, as has often been suggested, given property 3) and in which relative prominence within the c-command domain of a closed class head (rather than the specifier head relation) is the crucial syntactic foundation for agreement.

It follows that the silence corresponding to an agreeing argument must be syntactically real and that we have strong evidence for the existence of a phonologically null (but syntactically routine) pronoun.

Larger implications follow for the role of agreement (and similar morphosyntactic interactions) in determining word order and clausal organization.