

Singular *-st* Syncretism and Featural Pied-Piping

Jim Wood

As is well known, Icelandic dative-nominative constructions exhibit number agreement with 3rd person nominative objects, but cannot agree with 1st or 2nd person objects.

- (1) a. *Maríu voru gefnir báðir drengirnir.*
 Mary.DAT were.3PL given.3PL.M both boys.the.NOM
 ‘Mary was given both the boys.’
- b. **Maríu vorum gefnir við.*
 Mary.DAT were.1PL given.3PL.M we.NOM Sigurðsson (1992:71)
- (2) a. *Henni höfðu líkað þeir.*
 her.DAT had.3PL liked they.NOM
 ‘She had liked them.’
- b. **Henni höfðum líkað við.*
 her.DAT had.1PL liked we.NOM Sigurðsson (1996:38)

In standard approaches to person restrictions on nominative objects, the verb must agree with both the dative subject and the nominative object (Boeckx 2000, Schütze 2003, Koopman 2006). Agreement with the dative yields 3rd person singular (default) agreement, as can be independently verified by constructions with non-nominative subjects and no nominative object.

- (3) a. *Hafði þér ekki leiðst?*
 had.3SG you.DAT not bored
 ‘Were you not bored?’ Sigurðsson (1989:225)
- b. *Var þér boðið í veisluna?*
 was.3SG you.DAT invited to party.the.ACC
 ‘Were you invited to the party?’ Sigurðsson (1989:309)

If the verb agrees with both a dative subject and a non-3rd-person object, then, there is a feature clash—the verb must simultaneously be 3rd and 1st (or 2nd) person. However, if the paradigm of a given verb happens to exhibit syncretism for the two forms, the sentence is judged to be improved.

(4)

<i>líka</i> ‘like’			
SG	1	líkaði	líkuðum
	2	líkaðir	líkuðuð
	3	líkaði	líkuðu

- (5) a. ??*Henni líkaði ég.*
 her.DAT liked.1/3SG I.NOM
- b. **Henni líkaðir þú.*
 her.DAT liked.2SG you.SG.NOM Sigurðsson (1996:33)

The claim, then, is that the availability of a form which can express both sets of features allows a way to get around the feature clash.

However, not all syncretisms are equally ameliorative: if syncretism is induced by a “middle” suffix (-*st*), the ameliorative effect of syncretism is stronger than other cases of syncretism, and this is not predicted by any of the standard analyses. The following data from Sigurðsson (1992) shows the number of speakers who judged each sentence as ‘OK’ or ‘?’ on the one hand, and ‘??’ or ‘*’ on the other.

(6)				OK/?	??/*
a.	Henni	líkaði	ég.	5	4
	her.DAT	liked.1/3.SG	I.NOM		
b.	Henni	leiddist	ég.	8	1
	her.DAT	bored.1/2/3.SG	I.NOM		

Data from Sigurðsson (1992:74-76)

I will claim that this is related to another aspect of -*st* morphology: the -*st* suffix collapses all person distinctions in the singular, and this holds across all inflectional classes and cannot be due to phonology.

(7)		<i>líka</i> ‘like’	<i>leiðast</i> ‘bore’
SG	1	líkaði	leiddist
	2	líkaðir	leiddist
	3	líkaði	leiddist
PL	1	líkuðum	leiddumst
	2	líkuðuð	leiddust
	3	líkuðu	leiddust

If this fact is derived in the syntax, then there are two kinds of syncretism: the kind which is underlain by the syntactic derivation, and the kind which arises at PF. I will provide an analysis wherein the former provides the means to avoid building the ‘contradictory’ feature bundles which are standardly assumed to cause the derivation to crash in non-syncretic cases. The latter, on the other hand, only improves the example because there is no overt reflection of the contradictory feature bundle which is nevertheless present in the syntax to morphology mapping.

References

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