Agreeable predicate nominals

Marcel den Dikken

Eötvös Loránd University & Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics

Abstract. This paper looks at Dutch copular sentences featuring number agreement between the copula and the predicate nominal. The data are argued to emphasise the importance of structural locality in the distribution of number agreement in copular sentences.

In a debate that raged in the early 1960s in the pages of the premier Dutch linguistics journal of the era, *De nieuwe taalgids*, the sentences (1a) and (1b) played the lead role.[1]

(1) a. dat/dit/het zijn kooplieden
         that/this/it are   merchants
         'those/these/they are merchants'

    a′. dat/dit/het zijn Jan en   Marie
         that/this/it are   Jan and Marie
         'those/these/they are Jan and Marie'

---

1. These are often referred to in the Dutch linguistics community as '*kooplieden* sentences', because of the choice of plural noun in the original examples, probably inspired by the sentence *dat zijn geen ezels, dat zijn kooplieden* '(lit.) that are no donkeys, that are merchants' in the book *De jonge reizende kooplieden, of de opvoeding door den drang der noodzakelijkheid* 'the young travelling merchants, or education by the force of necessity', the 1841 Dutch rendition of the original French by Langlois. For discussion of '*kooplieden* sentences', see Broekhuis & Den Dikken 2012: §8.2.3.

    b.   ik denk dat dat/dit/het kooplieden zijn
          I   think that that/this/it merchants   are
          'I think that those/these/they are merchants'

   b'. ... dat dat/dit/het Jan en Marie zijn
         ... that that/this/it Jan and Marie are
         '... that those/these/they are J. and M.'

These sentences are noteworthy for the fact that they involve a neuter singular pronoun (distal *dat* 'that', proximal *dit* 'this' or simply *het* 'it') in what appears to be the structural subject position of a copular clause whose finite copula bears plural inflection (*zijn* 'are'). There is something that can control plural agreement in these sentences: the postcopular constituent. But in (1a') and (1b'), the postcopular noun phrase *kooplieden* appears to be the predicate nominal — so the copula would be agreeing for number with the predicate rather than the subject, in an apparent upset of the familiar agreement pattern of finite clauses, instantiated by (2), where the copula cannot agree with the postcopular plural predicate nominal *de Beatles*; plural number agreement only becomes possible (indeed, obligatory) when the relative order of the two noun phrases is inverted, as in (2b).

(2)   a.   John Lennon was/*waren de Beatles
          John Lennon was/were   the Beatles
          'John Lennon was/*were The Beatles'

     b.   de Beatles waren/*was John Lennon
          the Beatles were/was   John Lennon
          'The Beatles were/*was John Lennon'

As early as De Groot 1949: p. 153, linguists have sought to circumvent the agreement problem posed by (1) by treating *kooplieden* as the subject of these sentences, with the pronoun analysed as the underlying predicate, realised in the structural subject position (cf. Moro 1997). Bos 1961 stepped into De Groot's shadow. But Merckens 1961 disagreed that the pronoun in (1) is necessarily the predicate of these copular sentences, pointing out that there is an ambiguity in sentences of this type that can be brought out by forcing the pronoun

into the predicate position. Thus, consider (3), which is in fact the title of Merckens' paper.

(3)   zijn dat kooplieden of zijn kooplieden dat?
      are that merchants or are merchants that
      'are they merchants, or are merchants (like) that?'

In the second disjunct of (3), *dat* explicitly finds itself in the position of the predicate, with the finite copula *zijn* undergoing inversion with the subject *kooplieden* 'merchants'. But in the first disjunct, subject–finite verb inversion flips the relative positions of *zijn* and *dat*, with the latter clearly occupying the structural subject position. The fact that the two disjuncts of (3) mean very different things (as their English prose translations help bring out) makes it unlikely that they have the same underlier. While *dat* is clearly a predicate in the second disjunct of (3), it must instead be the deep subject of the first, with *kooplieden* 'merchants' in the predicate position.

Is agreement with *zijn* in the left-hand examples in (1) and the first disjunct of (3) controlled by the predicate nominal or could these sentences involve a subject that is more complex than meets the eye, containing an abstract plural element — perhaps a reduced version of something like (4)?

(4)   dat/dit soort/type mensen zijn kooplieden
      that/this sort/type people are merchants
      'that/this sort/type of people are merchants'

The problem with relating (1) to (4) is that (4) is not semantically equivalent to (1): in (1) we are not talking about a sort or type of people; we are talking instead about a bunch of specific individuals of whom we are saying that they are merchants. Moreover, (4) does not get us very far in the case of the version of (1) that features *het* 'it' rather than *dat* or *dit*: like its English translation, Dutch *het soort mensen zijn kooplieden* 'the sort of people are merchants' is incomplete; a relative clause would have to be added to the subject to make it work. Also, once we allow abstract soort/type mensen to occur in the subject position, there is no obvious reason why we should not

also allow it in the predicate position, which would open the door to sentences of the type in (5), which are impossible whereas (6) is fine.

(5) *(wat types mensen betreft,) dit zijn precies dat
    as regards types of people this are precisely that

(6) dit type mensen zijn precies dat type mensen
     this type people are precisely that type people

Another potential avenue towards making the pronominal subject responsible for plural agreement with the copula in (1) could be to capitalise on the fact that this pronoun needs an antecedent, presentable as a hanging topic immediately preceding the pronoun, as in (7). One might venture the hypothesis that the pronoun in the structural subject position of '*kooplieden* sentences' forms an underlying constituent with a plural-triggering hanging topic, overtly present in the case of (7) and silent in (1).

(7) {die   mannen/Jan en Piet}, dat zijn kooplieden
       those men   Jan and   Piet that are
     'those men/Jan and Piet, those are merchants'

This hypothesis faces the problem that a resumptive pronoun for a hanging topic in Dutch must ordinarily show concord in number and gender with the topic: see (8) (where 'cg' stands for 'common gender'). The combination of a plural or conjoined hanging topic with a singular resumptive is impossible in (8b). Treating (1) on a par with (7) and having the hanging topic trigger plural verb inflection without forcing concord with the resumptive would not be straightforward, therefore.

(8) a.   {het   meisje, dat/de   jongen, die}
              the.nt.sg girl.   that.nt.sg/the.cg.sg boy   that.cg.sg
            speelt gitaar
            plays guitar

     b.   {die mannen/Jan en Piet}, die/*dat   spelen gitaar
            those men/Jan   and Piet   those.pl/that play   guitar

Seeking to reconcile the hypothesis that the copula can only agree with the occupant of SpecIP under Spec–Head agreement and the empirical fact that the copula apparently agrees with the postverbal subject in Italian *sono io* '(lit.) am I, i.e., it's me', Moro 1997: p. 66 argues that the pro-predicate *pro* in SpecIP can copy the φ-features of the subject of predication. In *pro sono io*, it is *pro* that controls agreement with the copula after φ-feature copying has applied. Could such an approach save the day for (1)? What this would require is the assumption that the pronoun in the structural subject position (*dat/dit/het*) can abstractly copy the number feature of the predicate *kooplieden* 'merchants' *without* the copied number feature being reflected in the surface exponent of the pronoun. Recall from (8) that Dutch demonstrative pronouns can actually show φ-feature inflection. But (1) features the neuter singular forms *dat* and *dit*. For (1) to fall out from Spec–Head agreement, the pronoun in the structural subject position in (1) would have to copy the φ-features of the postcopular constituent but fail to expone the copied φ-features on its own form.[2] I know of no precedent for this.

---

2. For Dutch (ia), the translation equivalent of Italian *sonio io*, the pronoun would, by this logic, have to copy the person feature of the postverbal pronoun *ik*. One might consider that this gives us a purchase on the ungrammaticality of *het* 'it' in (ia), on the assumption that *het* (unlike the demonstrative pronouns) is explicitly specified for third person and hence not a possible target for person feature copying. But the roots of the ungrammaticality of (ia) with *het* arguably lie elsewhere. Note that subordinate (ib) is ungrammatical, which indicates that the word order in (ia) is the product of topicalisation *cum* subject–finite verb inversion (I-to-C movement), with *ik* in SpecIP. It is well known that the weak pronoun *het* 'it' is ineligible for topicalisation (**het heb ik gelezen* 'it have I read'). Topicalisation thus accounts for the ill-formedness of (ia) with *het* — and it also provides a simple account of person agreement with *ik* in (ia): *ik* is the structural subject (just as in subordinate (ib′), where *het* is grammatical because it has not been topicalised).

(i) a. dat/dit/*het ben ik
         that/this/it   am   I

    b.*ik denk dat   dat/dit/het ik ben
       I   think that that/this/it I   am

    b′. ik denk dat   ik dat/dit/het ben
       I   think that I   that/this/it am

The point of setting up an analysis of (1) along the lines of (4), (7) or Moro's (1997) account of *sono io* was to make (1) be 'well-behaved' in featuring agreement with the structural subject. The failure of these analyses leads us back to the conclusion that in (1) the copula really and truly agrees with the plural predicate nominal, not with the occupant of the structural subject position. A simple answer to the question of how the copula manages to agree with the predicate nominal would be that the position of first-merge for the copula in (1) is the relator head in (9) (cf. Den Dikken 2006).

(9)   [RP [Subject *dat/dit/het* 'that/this/it'] [R   RELATOR=*zijn* 'are' [Predicate *kooplieden* 'merchants']]]

In (9), the closest target for an Agree relation involving the copula *qua* relator is the predicate nominal. This is likely to be an ingredient of the answer. But it cannot be complete answer. This is clear from the fact that it remains possible to have the finite verb agree with *kooplieden* even when that finite verb is not the copula itself but, for instance, a modal, not merged under the relator, as in (10).

(10)   dat/dit/het zouden   kooplieden kunnen zijn
       that/this/it   would.pl merchants   can.inf   be
       'those/these/they could be merchants'

The syntax of Dutch does not give predicate nominals a blanket licence to control agreement with the finite verb. While (11a) allows (indeed, prefers) singular *het* 'it' as the subject of the plural-inflected semi-copula, in non-copular (11b) plural inflection is possible only with plural *ze* 'they'.

(11)   a.   als je   kikkers kust, worden   {ze/het} prinsen
            if   you frogs   kiss   become.pl they/it   princes
            'if you kiss frogs, they become princes'

       b.   als je   kikkers kust, veranderen {ze/*het} in prinsen
            if   you frogs   kiss   change   they/it   in princes
            'if you kiss frogs, they turn into princes'

The ill-formedness of (11b) with *het* gives us an important clue as to the conditions under which a predicative plural noun phrase can control agreement with the finite verb: the predicate nominal (*prinsen* 'princes') here appears inside a PP, making it inaccessible to T.

The contrast in (11) stands out as clear evidence for the hypothesis that in (11a) with *het* (and, by parity of reasoning, in the left-hand examples in (1) as well) the plural finite verb agrees in number with the predicate nominal. Such agreement therefore exists. But it is possible only if the finite verb and the predicate nominal are sufficiently local in syntactic structure.

Acknowledgements

References

Bos, G.F. 1961. Dat zijn kooplieden. *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 54. 23–27.
Broekhuis, H. & M. Den Dikken. 2012. *The syntax of Dutch: Nouns and noun phrases (Vol. 2)*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
De Groot, H.W. 1949. *Structurele syntaxis*. Den Haag: Servire.

Den Dikken, M. 2006. *Relators and linkers*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Merckens, P.J. 1961. Zijn dat kooplieden of zijn kooplieden dat? *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 54. 153–54.

Moro, A. 1997. *The raising of predicates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.