Tracking Agreement Mismatches in Middle English

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In this paper we seek to clarify the status of 'mis-agreement' in Late Middle English (LME), where subject NPs did not always agree with the finite verb of their clause. The syntactic position of the subject appears criterial here. In a trial sample of 25 non-pronominal plural subjects following the finite verb taken from the Paston correspondence between 1440-1465, 60% were singular in form, such as:

(1) Ther *is* labouryd many menys to intytill the Kyng in his good.   *1459*
(2) This same Moneday *goth* my lord Chaunceller and my Lord of Buk into Kent.   *1450*
(3) Ther *is* grete spies layd here.   *?1463*
(4) Ther *was* grete labours made by the bayly of Coshay.   *1465*

In contrast, an equivalent sample of subjects preceding the finite verb had almost exceptionless agreement:

(5) Bothe his brethren *arn* so sodenly discharged from ther offices.   *1456*
(6) Many men *say* that there shuld be.   *1456*

The mis-agreement phenomenon mostly occurred in constructions with expletive *there* and an 'associate' subject (Chomsky 1995). We seek to develop a satisfactory analysis accounting for the sharp contrast between pre- and post-verbal subjects in this sample and investigate whether it can be upheld in a larger empirical survey. Ideally, we would like to understand the phenomenon diachronically, i.e. to know whether mis-agreement was syntactically conditioned in Early Middle English, and then how the structure of (standard) English changed in the Early Modern period, rendering agreement failure ungrammatical.

The syntax literature over recent years has discussed a number of cases in other languages analogous to the mis-agreement phenomenon in Middle English. Aoun, Benmamoun & Sportiche (1994), for example, discussed Arabic in which agreement is found in SVO clauses, but not in VSO. They argued that in SVO clauses the subject NP is in [Spec,Agr-S], but that in the latter it is in [Spec,VP]. Likewise, van Gelderen (1997a) has shown that in Old English agreement inflections were often reduced when the verb raised to C. Within the assumptions of Principles-and-Parameters theory and more recent Minimalist Program work (Chomsky 1995, 2001), agreement takes place, canonically at least, when the verb and the subject are in a Spec-Head relationship. In early minimalism, this was handled within an Agr-S projection within the inflectional domain of the clause. Logically speaking, this Spec-head arrangement can be disturbed in one or both of two ways: the finite verb may not be in the head position of Agr-S, and/or the subject may not be in the Spec position of Agr-S. The cases of Arabic and Old English illustrate these two logical possibilities.

LME presents an interesting challenge for a syntactic theory of agreement, with an extra factor: the frequent presence in the mis-agreeing data of the expletive *there*, which is strongly reminiscent of a group of multiple subject constructions known as expletive-associate constructions, as studied by e.g. Bobaljik & Jonas (1996) in Icelandic.

(9) Það   <u>borðuðu</u> *margir strákar* bjúgun   ekki öll.   (transitive expletive construction)
     There ate   many boys   sausages.the not all
     'Many boys didn't eat all of the sausages.'

(10) Ðað   hafa *nokkrar kökur* verið bakaðar til veisluna.   (expletive passive construction)
There have some   cakes been baked   for party.the
'Some cakes have been baked for the party.'

They argued that the associate subject in such multiple subject constructions is in [Spec,T], the tensed verb stands in Agr-S, and the expletive subject is in [Spec,Agr-S], an analysis adopted for Middle English by Tanaka (2000). In this research we will investigate whether mis-agreement in Late Middle English comports with a split-INFL approach.

Van Gelderen (1997b) has proposed that mis-agreement phenomena in English and other languages can be handled in terms of nominative case-assignment under government, without resorting to Agr-SP. Arguments remain in VP, in her analysis. It is not clear from her analysis, however, in what way the typical patterns found in transitive expletives and their equivalent in Middle English should be handled, within more recent approaches to VP structure. It would also seem desirable, if a Minimalist framework is to be adhered to consistently, to handle case assignment without recourse to government. These considerations motivate the research questions below:

(i) To account for mis-agreement in Middle English transitive expletive and expletive passive constructions, are Agreement projections, abandoned in many recent formulations of Chomsky's Minimalist Program (see e.g. Chomsky 2001), needed for LME, or will special positions for quantified/negated expressions suffice?

(ii) When and why did mis-agreement decline in educated written English?

We seek to ascertain the structural position(s) of the subject NP in the non-agreeing examples. In many cases, notably in passives and unaccusatives (such as (1)-(2) above), it presumably remained *in situ* within the VP. However, a subject-*in-situ* analysis fails for (3)-(4). Such associate subjects in LME may turn out to be predominantly if not exclusively quantified, not predicted by the analysis of Tanaka (2000) and may thus show Quantifier Raising (QR) out of VP. What is needed is a much larger scale investigation of Middle English and early Modern English multiple subject constructions, in order to determine whether mis-agreement follows the predictions of our trial analysis discussed above, and then whether QR provides an adequate analysis.

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