

Agree to Disagree?

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Background

In Danish, predicative adjectives normally agree with subjects in number and gender. Nevertheless, speakers occasionally produce sentences where an adjective agrees in number with prepositional object (P-Obj) instead, even when the P-Obj is an overtly accusative pronouns (Engberg-Pedersen & Poulsen 2010). For example, speakers may produce *Dem er jeg helt vild-e med* (lit. 'them am I really crazy-PLUR about') rather than the standard *Dem er jeg vild-Ø med* ('them am I really crazy-SING about'). This pattern is unexpected because the P-Obj is not the grammatical controller of agreement.

The phenomenon differs from the well-studied agreement attraction effects reported for languages such as English, where errors typically arise when a competing noun phrase intervenes between the subject and the agreement target (e.g., *The key to the cabinets are missing*, Franck et al. 2002). In the Danish construction, by contrast, the grammatical subject always immediately precedes the adjective (*...er jeg vild...*), while the competing P-Obj never intervenes, as it either appears sentence-initially through topicalization or remains inside the prepositional phrase. Consequently, the Danish pattern cannot be explained by structural intervention alone and therefore provides an informative case for theories of agreement sentence processing and language production.

The present study addresses three questions: Does the grammatical number of the P-Obj influence the likelihood of non-standard agreement? How acceptable is agreement with P-Obj to native speakers of Danish? Does the observed pattern reflect an emerging change in the agreement system or are they better explained as systematic performance effects?

Methods and materials

The study consists of three behavioral experiments (Christensen and Nyvad 2019, 202; Nyvad and Christensen 2023). **Experiments 1 and 2** were sentence-completion tasks administered through Google Forms (N = 100 and N = 74, respectively). Participants filled in predicative adjectives in sentences where the grammatical subject and the P-Obj differed in number. Thirteen adjectives were tested across 26 experimental items (plus fillers). Experiment 1 examined constructions with fronted P-Objs, while Experiment 2 used corresponding in-situ P-Objs. **Experiment 3** was an acceptability judgment task (N = 197), in which participants rated sentences on seven-point Likert scales. The design manipulated agreement type (standard vs. non-standard), constituent order (fronted vs. in-situ P-Obj), and number of the P-Obj (singular vs. plural). Twenty-eight experimental items (plus fillers) were modeled on attested naturally occurring examples.

Results

The production experiments revealed clear asymmetries. The sentence-completion studies (Experiments 1 and 2) revealed that non-standard agreement occurred significantly more frequently with singular P-Obj than plural P-Obj. In Experiment 1, alternative agreement occurred in 43% of fronted singular conditions but only 15% of fronted plural conditions. In Experiment 2, the corresponding figures were 14% and 1%, respectively. Thus, fronting substantially increased non-standard agreement, especially with a singular P-Obj. Lexical frequency of adjectives also affected production: More frequent adjectives elicited significantly higher rates of non-standard agreement than less frequent adjectives, suggesting that lexical accessibility may contribute to the phenomenon.

The acceptability study in Experiment 3 showed that standard agreement was consistently preferred across conditions. Nevertheless, constituent order influenced speakers'

evaluations. Fronted non-standard agreement received significantly higher ratings than in-situ non-standard agreement. Moreover, ratings for fronted non-standard agreement were widely distributed across the scale, suggesting considerable speaker variation and uncertainty regarding its status, whereas in-situ non-standard agreement was rated consistently low.

Taken together, the production and judgement data indicate that the non-standard agreement phenomenon is neither random nor fully acceptable. Instead, its occurrence depends systematically on both syntactic configuration and grammatical number.

Discussion

Based on the findings in the experiments above, it could be argued that the observed pattern is most readily explained by the interaction of two independently motivated mechanisms. First, Danish exhibits a strong tendency toward **apocope**, whereby unstressed inflectional endings are frequently omitted in speech (Schachtenhaufen 2013). When the grammatical subject is plural and the P-Obj is singular, deletion of the plural adjective ending (-e) produces a surface form that appears to agree with the singular P-Obj rather than the grammatical subject. This mechanism predicts increased rates of apparent non-standard agreement specifically in singular P-Obj conditions, precisely the asymmetry observed in the experiments.

Second, **sentence-initial position** appears to bias agreement computation. Danish clauses are most often subject-initial, meaning that comprehenders and speakers strongly expect the first constituent to function as the subject. When a P-Obj is fronted, speakers may initially analyze it as the subject before revising this interpretation once the actual post-verbal subject is encountered. Consistent with findings on lingering misinterpretations in sentence processing (Christianson et al. 2001), this initial analysis may increase the likelihood of agreement with the fronted constituent despite its non-subject status.

Importantly, these two factors predict the complete experimental pattern: Non-standard agreement reaches its highest frequency when both mechanisms operate simultaneously (fronted singular P-Objs), occurs at much lower rates when only one factor is present, and is virtually absent when neither factor applies (in-situ plural P-Objs). At the same time, the present findings cannot fully exclude an alternative interpretation. Although the experimental data (which did not find a significant effect of age, gender or region) is more consistent with a processing-based account than with a restructured agreement system, distinguishing between these explanations requires evidence beyond controlled experiments. Corpus data from spontaneous speech might help determine whether the observed pattern reflects stable performance biases or an ongoing grammatical development.

References

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