Lexical Category Distinctions and Agreement

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Many languages of the world show a three way distinction among the lexical categories when it comes to agreement. Verbs are the richest agreeers: they can agree with up to two noun phrases (e.g. subject and object) in a full range of phi-features (person, number, and gender). Adjectives are intermediate agreers: they can agree with a single noun phrase in certain phi features (number, gender) but not others (person). Nouns do not agree at all in the syntactic sense: they resist agreement with another noun phrase, even though they often have inflectional affixes that are cognate with the affixes on verbs and adjectives that are involved in agreement. These contrasts are shown in (1) for Swahili.

(1) a. *Ni-li-kuwa* *ni-ki-som-a.*
   1sS-PAST-be 1sS-CONT-read-FV  (Verbs)
   ‘I was reading.’ (ni- is 1st person, singular, animate gender)

b. *Ni-Ø* *m-refu.*  (Adjectives)
   1sS-be  CL1-tall
   ‘I am tall.’ (m- shows singular number, animate gender, but no person)

c. Dalili *y-a mvua ni ma-wingu.*  (Nouns)
   CL9.sign  CL9 CL9.rain  PRED  CL8-clouds
   ‘Clouds are a sign of rain.’ (ma- is plural, different gender from ‘sign’)

First, I show that this pattern is too stable across languages to be due simply to idiosyncratic stipulations about the feature slots associated with individual lexical items in particular languages. Second, I point out that theories that take person features to the definitional property of verbs and gender features to be the definitional properties of nouns (e.g. Ouhalla 2005) are inadequately general, because they do not extend to agreementless languages like Japanese. Finally, I show how the syntactically oriented theory of lexical categories developed in Baker (2003) can be combined with a slightly modified theory of Agree based on Chomsky (2000, 2001) in order to explain contrasts like those in (1) in a principled manner. No category-specific principles of agreement are required; the results follow from rules that are sensitive to general syntactic configurations, plus the independently known fact that different lexical categories are found in systematically different syntactic configurations. One result of this is that even verbs lose the ability to agree with an NP in person when they are used in syntactic environments that are comparable to those in which adjectives are found.