

Directions of Agree

(Bjorkman / Zeijlstra)

The operation Agree lies at the heart of current Minimalist syntactic theory. As originally proposed by Chomsky (1998), Agree allows an unvalued/uninterpretable feature (the “Probe”) to search its c-command domain for a valued/interpretable counterpart (the “Goal”) by which it can be valued/checked. In addition to the licensing of uninterpreted features, moreover, Agree acts as a trigger for movement, and so drives the syntactic derivation.

In recent work a debate has arisen concerning the direction of Agree: contra Chomsky’s original definition, several authors have suggested that Agree involves a Goal located higher than a Probe (Wurmbrand, 2011; Zeijlstra, 2012; a.o.); others have proposed that the direction of Agree should be parameterized (Baker, 2008). This work has argued that some phenomena can be accounted for only by a “reversed” Agree (particularly negative concord, by Zeijlstra, and some cases of verbal inflection, by Wurmbrand), but in response authors such as Preminger (2013) have argued that the original downwards-probing directionality of Agree is needed to account for some cases of long-distance PHI-agreement.

This course will provide an overview of the debate concerning the direction of Agree, comparing specific theoretical proposals and looking at their applicability to different empirical domains and different languages. We begin with an overview of the cases Agree was originally proposed to account for, then compared with the cases for which “reversed” Agree was proposed. In the later part of the week we will concentrate on agreement with post-verbal arguments, the area where the greatest debate has arisen regarding the feasibility of “reversed” Agree.