Agreement With and Past Oblique Subjects: New Considerations from Kurmanji*

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1. Introduction

Kurmanji, an Indo-Iranian language spoken in southeastern Turkey, is a split ergative language. In clauses that contain the "present stem", the subject is in unmarked case (see (1), (2)), whereas the object (if any) bears a marked case (see (1)). Following the tradition in Iranian linguistics, we call the unmarked case *direct* and the marked case *oblique*.

(1) **ez** te dɪ-wun-**ɪm**-e. *present transitive*
I.**DIR** you.OBL IMPF-see-**1sg**-COP
'I am seeing you.'

(2) **ez** tê-**m**-e. *present intransitive*
I.DIR IMPF.come-**1sg**-COP
'I am coming.'

In contrast, in clauses containing the "past stem", subjects of transitive clauses are oblique, while objects are direct ((3)). Subjects of intransitive verbs are always direct.

(3) te **ez** di-**m**. *past transitive*
you.OBL I.**DIR** saw-**1sg**
'You(sg) saw me.'

(4) **ez** hat-ɪ**m**. *past intransitive*
I.DIR came-**1sg**-COP
'I came.'

*We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Idan Landau, Omer Preminger, Maziar Toosarvandani, and the participants of the Syntax Lab at Rutgers University for comments and helpful discussion. All errors are our own. Abbreviations used in the glosses include: ACC, accusative; COP, copula; ERG, ergative; IMPF, imperfective; NOM, nominative; NUM, number; OBL, oblique case; PART, participant; PL, plural; PRES, present; SG, singular.

In (1)-(4), agreement on the verb consistently tracks the NP in direct case. A question that arises for the theory of agreement, then, is this: why does the verb fail to agree with the subject and instead agree with the object in transitive past clauses like (3), and only those.

At first glance, the answer seems obvious: apparently, the subject NP in (3) is inaccessible for agreement because it has oblique case. This can be attributed to the Activity Condition of Chomsky (2001). According to the Activity Condition, an NP is active for Agree only if it has an unvalued structural case feature. Once its case value has been determined, an NP can no longer enter into agreement relations. In (3), the subject has oblique case; hence, it is no longer available for agreement. Thus, the agreement probe finds the next closest NP, in this case the theme argument.

A similar explanation is Bobaljik's (2008) M-Case approach. Following Marantz's (1991) disjunctive hierarchy for case, Bobaljik argues that languages can choose a cut-off point on the hierarchy in (5) for agreement purposes. For example, if a language chooses to cut off agreement at the first point, unmarked case, then agreement always goes with arguments that have unmarked case. All other arguments are invisible for agreement.

(5) Unmarked Case > Dependent Case > Lexical/Oblique Case

In Kurmanji, then, agreement is set for the unmarked (direct) case. Oblique case is a form of dependent or lexical case, and hence not accessible for agreement.

There are, however, important details about the Kurmanji ergative construction that motivate taking a fresh look, revising this interpretation of the data. The first such detail is that oblique subjects are not entirely inert for agreement in Kurmanji. It is quite possible for the verb to agree in number with a third person plural oblique subject, as in (6).

(6) **Wana** hew di-**n**
they.OBL he.DIR saw-PL
'They saw him.'

This fact challenges the Activity Condition, in that the oblique subject is still at least partially active for agreement. It also challenges Bobaljik's M-Case type analysis, which expects either complete agreement with oblique NPs or no agreement at all, drawing no distinction between person agreement and number agreement.

The second detail is that oblique subjects in Kurmanji do not intervene to prevent T from agreeing with the object despite being "active" for agreement. As clearly seen in (3), oblique subjects do not block agreement with objects. This is different from the famous defective intervention effects in Icelandic where a dative subject cannot be agreed with but still blocks agreement with something below it under certain conditions.

To short, then, Kurmanji oblique subjects can be agreed with when the subject is 3PL; but oblique subjects do not block agreement with objects. This calls into question whether there is any essential relationship between whether an NP can undergo agreement and whether it blocks agreement with a more remote target. We argue for an alternative analysis, in which the power to be agreed with depends on the morphological structure of the nominal, and only absolute locality conditions restrict Agree.

Our paper is organized as follows. Section 2 lists our core assumptions. Section 3 focuses on why agreement in number is possible with oblique subjects. Section 4 analyzes agreement with direct objects past oblique subjects. Section 5 concludes.

2. Core Assumptions

In order to provide an analysis of the agreement facts in Kurmanji, we need to make some assumptions about the structural positions of the probe and the goals. It is also important to take a stand on how the case is assigned to NPs in split-ergative fashion in Kurmanji.

Our first assumption regards the agreement configuration – the relative positions of the probing F head and the goal NPs. We assume that the configuration is as in (7).

(7) $F_{[\varphi]}$ > SUBJ > OBJ (where '>' means 'c-commands')

The configuration in (7) is supported by independent evidence from the literature. For example, Haig (2008), Gündoğdu (2011), and others show that in Kurmanji the subject c-commands the object, allowing it bind a reflexive inside the object, as in (8).

(8) Eşxan-ê kırık-ê xa di.
Eşxan-OBL child-EZAFE self saw
'Eşxan saw her child.'

In addition, Kalin and Atlamaz (2015) show that structure of the Kurmanji verbal complex is v+{-i/-t}+Agr, with the "-i/-t" piece expressing tense morphemes. Thus, the agreement morpheme attaches to the outside of the tense morpheme, suggesting that the agreement probe is at T or above. This supports the configuration in (7).

Our second assumption concerns case assignment in ergative constructions in Kurmanji. Kurmanji subjects have oblique case if and only if the clause is transitive and has a tense based on the past stem. Oblique case appears on past subjects independent of the agreement pattern. Hence, it cannot be assigned via agreement with a particular head.

There are two major views on ergative alignment in the literature. The first is the inherent case view (Woolford 2006), in which ergative is assigned by v to its specifier along with the agent theta-role. This view does not fare well in Kurmanji, given that agents of unergatives do not receive ergative, even in past clauses.

The second view, which we adopt here, is the dependent case view (Marantz 1991). According to this view, ergative is assigned to the higher of two NPs in the same domain. In particular, we assume that, in Kurmanji, oblique case is a dependent case assigned to the higher of the two NPs in the same clausal domain.

One question raised by this implementation is the nature of the split pattern in Kurmanji: why is dependent ergative case assigned to transitive subjects in past clauses but not present clauses? Following the implementation in Baker (2015), an assumption that does the job, and for which some other evidence can be mounted, is to say that v is a phase head in present tense clauses but not past tense clauses in Kurmanji (see also Karimi 2015). In order for dependent ergative case to be assigned, the two NPs must be visible in the syntax at the same time. The assumptions are in (9).

(9) a. If NP1 c-commands NP2 and both are in the same spell-out domain, then assign NP1 oblique.

b. v_{PRES} is a phase head in Kurmanji; v_{PAST} is not.

This proposal is in line with recent views on split ergativity. Coon and Preminger (2015) propose that split ergativity reflects a division in the clause structure. Ergative case in past tense clauses indicates that the clause has only one (cyclic) domain rather than two.

3. Agreement with Oblique Subjects

With these basic assumptions in place, we now develop a theory of agreement that explains number agreement with oblique subjects when the subject is third person plural (3PL). As shown in (6), 3PL oblique subjects are accessible for number agreement. This kind of agreement is possible only when the object is third singular, as in (6) and (11). When either the subject or the object is first or second person, number agreement with the subject is not possible, as in (10) and (12).

(10) **me/we** hew di /*di-**n**
we.OBL/you.OBL he.DIR saw /saw-PL
We/you(pl) saw him.

(11) **kırık-a** hew di-**n**
kids-PL.OBL he.DIR saw-PL
'Kids saw him.

(12) ***wana** ez/tı di-**n**
they.OBL I.DIR/you.DIR saw-PL
They saw me/you.

The main question of this section is why are only 3PL pronouns and plural common nouns agreed with while first and second person pronouns are not, as in (11) versus (10).

One possible solution, which we immediately reject, is to say that oblique first and second person pronouns lack person and number features while oblique third person nominals have number features. Although descriptively accurate, this approach looks completely ad-hoc; it simply recapitulates the empirical observation. Moreover, other linguistic evidence suggests that oblique NPs in Kurmanji retain their person features. This evidence comes from bound pronoun agreement. Many researchers believe that a pronoun must in some sense agree with its antecedent in φ-features, especially if the pronoun is interpreted as a bound variable at LF, so that it has no interpretable person feature of its own (Kratzer 2009, Safir 2014, etc.). Given this, consider the English paradigm in (13).

(13) a. Only I hope that I will win. (the only x for which x hopes x will win is me).
b. Only Daddy hopes that he will win.
(the only x for which x hopes x will win is Daddy (=me)).
c. Daddy hopes that I will win.
(?? where Daddy and I both refer to the speaker.)
d. #Only Daddy hopes that I will win.
(* as the only x for which x hopes x wins is the speaker = Daddy)
(possible only as: the only x for which x hopes I will win is Daddy)

It might be marginally possible for a third person expression and a first person expression in the same sentence both to refer to the speaker in an example like (13c), but it is completely impossible for a bound pronoun to disagree in person with its binder in this way, as seen in (13d). The bound reading is good only if both expressions are first person ((13a)) or both are third person ((13b)). With this in mind, consider (14):

(14) a. Mı tenê xast ki e qezenç k-ım
I.OBL only wanted that I.DIR win do-1SG
'Only I wanted that I win.' (For x=I, x wanted x to win)

b. Mı tenê xast ki hew qezenç k-e
I.OBL only wanted that he.DIR win do-3SG
'Only I wanted that he wins.' (Not for x=I, x wanted x to win)

These examples are like the examples in (13a), but with the wrinkle that the matrix subject is in oblique case. If oblique subjects lack local person features, then we might expect (14b) to be possible and (14a) to be bad on a bound anaphora reading, on essentially the same grounds that (13d) is bad but (13b) is possible in English. But the opposite is true: (14a) allows a bound variable reading, whereas (14b) does not. Hence, we deduce that oblique NPs in Kurmanji have person features in the syntax.

The alternative explanation for (10)-(12) that we propose is the following. Agreement is a two-step process consisting of *Agree* proper happening in the Syntax and *Value Transfer* happening at PF. Analyses along these lines have recently been proposed by Bhatt and Walkov (2013) and Marušič et.al. (2015). In addition, when values are being transferred, only those features that belong to the outermost layer of the nominal are transferred. Value Transfer is thus sensitive to morphological structure of nominals as established by PF rules like *Fusion.* (15) states that Value Transfer happens after Fusion.

(15) *Agree* → *Fusion* → *Value Transfer*

This proposal thus relates the morphological details of Kurmanji nominals to how they interact with agreement in order to explain the crucial data.

To flesh out this idea, we propose that Kurmanji oblique nominals have an additional structural layer not present on direct case nominals: the K head of Lamontagne and Travis (1987), Bittner and Hale (1996), and others. This structural difference corresponds to the obvious fact that, with morphologically regular nouns, the oblique form includes a suffix (e.g. *-e*) as well as a root, whereas the direct forms consist of a root alone, as seen in (16).

(16) a. keçık b. keçık-**e** K= *-e*
girl.DIR girl-OBL

Furthermore, in Kurmanji, the oblique case morpheme *-e* fuses with the plural feature under certain circumstances, becoming *-a*. In particular, this happens with ordinary nominals and with third person pronouns, as shown in (17). Note that these oblique plural forms do not have separate number and case morphemes, as an agglutinative language like Turkish would. This motivates fusing NUM and K into a single node in Kurmanji.

(17)

Noun (*girl*)	**3rd pronoun**		**Lexical Item**
keçık-e	w-e	OBL, SG	K = *e*
keçık-a	wan-a	OBL, PL	Num(PL)+K = *a*

However, this fusion of case and number does not happen in the same way with local pronouns in Kurmanji, the forms of which are shown in (18). Here, number fuses with person, not with case. The result is special plural pronominal roots (*m-* and *w-*), but no special plural case marker like *-a*. Instead, the oblique plural forms in (18) have *-e*, the same suffix found with oblique singulars in (17) and the second singular pronoun in (18).

(18)

Person	**Singular**		**Plural**		
	DIR	**OBL**	**DIR**	**OBL**	
1	ez	mın	em	m-e	**K = *e***
2	tı	t-e	un	w-e	

Our claim, then, is that this difference in fusion patterns between third person nominals and local pronouns explains why third person obliques can trigger plural agreement on the verb in (6) and (11), but first and second person obliques cannot in (10).

We execute this idea as follows. (19) gives the disjunctive fusion rules for Kurmanji nominals that account for the pattern of morphemes seen in (17) and (18).

(19) *Disjunctive Fusion Rules* (for Kurmanji)

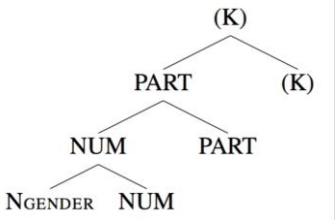
a. Fuse PART and NUM if both are present. (cf. plural column in (18))
b. Otherwise, fuse NUM and K if both are present. (cf. NUM+K row in (17))
c. Otherwise, fuse NOUN and NUM if both are present.

In addition, we assume, following Harley and Ritter (2002), that φ-features are hierarchically organized inside the nominal according to the hierarchy in (20).

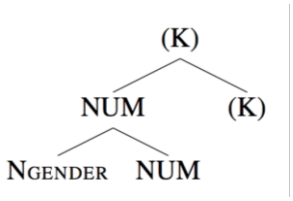
(20) PERSON dominates NUMBER dominates GENDER

As a special case of this, we assume that first and second person pronouns have a PARTICIPANT (PERSON) node which is absent in third person pronouns and NPs. Thus, at PF, the initial structures of the two sorts of nominals are as in (21) and (22).

(21)



(22)



The fusion rules in (19) then apply to structures like (21) and (22) to give the outputs tabulated in (23). Here the outermost layer of each nominal is bolded.

(23)

	Initial Structure	**Fusion**	**Descriptive Category**
a.	[[…NUM] PART]	**[…NUM+PART]** by (20a)	*direct local pronoun*
b.	[[[…NUM] PART] K]	[[…NUM+PART] **K**] by (20a)	*oblique local pronoun*
c.	[[NOUN] NUM]	**[NOUN+NUM]** by (20c)	*direct noun*
d.	[[[NOUN] NUM] K]	[[NOUN] **NUM+K**] by (20b)	*oblique noun*

(23a) concerns 1.DIR and 2.DIR pronouns created by (19a). The outermost (only) layer of the nominal contains both PART and NUM features. Therefore, full person and number agreement with such nominals is possible. This is seen in (24).

(24)	**ez**	te	dı-wun-**ım**-e	*present transitive*
	I.**DIR**	you.OBL	IMPF-see-**1sg**-COP	
	'I am seeing you.'			

(23b) concerns 1.OBL and 2.OBL pronouns, also produced by (19a). Here the outermost layer is K, which does not fuse with anything. Therefore, we see the general default K morpheme *-e* on 1.PL.OBL and 2.PL.OBL pronouns in the last column of (18). Moreover, we now account for why T cannot agree with these nominals at all: there are no phi-features (neither PART nor NUM) in the outermost layer of (23b), but only K. This explains (10) repeated as (25).

(25)	**me/we**	hew	di	/*di-**n**
	we.OBL/you.OBL	he.DIR	saw	/saw-PL
	We/you(pl) saw him.			

In contrast to (23b), in (23d) NUM and K fuse by (19b) to form oblique nouns and third person pronouns. First, this creates the context for inserting the special oblique plural affix *-a*, seen in the bottom row of (17). Second, this puts NUM in the outermost layer of the structure, along with K. As a result, number agreement is possible with these nominals, despite their being oblique. This accounts for the surprising agreement in (6) and (11), which we set out to explain.

The bottom line of this analysis is that agreement with oblique nominals in Kurmanji shows that language specific fusion rules determine which values can be transferred to T in agreement relations. Value Transfer thus necessarily happens at PF, after Fusion. Although oblique pronouns have all the φ-features in the syntax, as indicated by the bound variable anaphora test, their contribution to agreement is restricted by the morphological structure of nominals, which is the result of fusion rules.

4. Agreement past Oblique Subjects

In Section 3, we argued that oblique subjects are active for agreement purposes in Kurmanji. In effect, there is full agreement with oblique subjects in the syntax. However, due to the morphological properties of the NP goals, only number features can be transferred to the probe in certain cases. In this section, we discuss a set of seemingly contradictory cases where the agreement is with the object. First, we look at examples in which there is full agreement with the object despite the subject's accessibility. The crucial question here is why does the subject *not* intervene? Second, we consider cases in which the object is oblique and the subject is direct, in present clauses. In these cases, the object is never agreed with. The question here is why *does* the subject intervene?

In Kurmanji past tense clauses with ergative alignment, when the object is a 1.DIR or 2.DIR pronoun, agreement is always with the object, not with the plural subject.

(26) a. Wana **ez** di-**m**.
they.OBL I.DIR saw-1SG
'They saw me.'

b. ***Wana** ez di-**n**.
they.OBL I.DIR saw-PL
'They saw me.'

c. ***Wana** **ez** di-**ni**.
they.OBL I.DIR saw-1PL
'They saw me.'

The agreement pattern in (26) is somewhat surprising from the point of view of intervention. If oblique subjects are active for agreement and there is nothing defective about the Agree relation between T and the oblique subject in the syntax (the limitations arise at PF), then the oblique NP should intervene, preventing agreement with the object in (26a), contrary to fact.

We propose that intervention does not arise in (26) simply because Kurmanji employs Multiple Agree in the sense of Hiraiwa (2005). This is stated in (27).

(27) T agrees with all visible NPs in its c-command domain.

The statement in (27) voids Relativized Minimality considerations because all NPs within the c-command domain of T are agreed with simultaneously. Therefore, no intervention occurs. It should be noted that (27) does not obviate all locality effects. We claim below that the Phase Impenetrability Condition is still a relevant locality constraint on agreement. However, we first show in more detail how multiple agreement works in Kurmanji.

Multiple Agree links T to all the NPs in T's c-command domain. Value Transfer then happens after fusion rules apply. As discussed in the previous section, no features can be transferred from a 1.OBL pronoun, while a number feature (only) can be transferred from a 3.PL.OBL nominal. Given Multiple Agree, then, in the example in (26), transfer to T from both the subject and the object yields the complex feature bundle in (28).

(28) [{PL} {1 SG}]

The complex feature bundle in (28) raises a conflict when it comes to lexical insertion. There are two lexical items competing for one slot, namely *-n*, which spells out plural, and *-m* which spells out first person singular. We propose that this conflict is resolved by the Universal Feature Hierarchy proposed by Noyer (1997). In cases of competition between different features, the Universal Feature Hierarchy in (29) determines which take priority for lexical insertion.

(29) 1 person > 2 person > dual > plural > other features

Applied to the feature bundle in (28), the Universal Feature Hierarchy gives priority to the feature 1, which is bundled with SG in this case. Therefore, the vocabulary item *-m* is inserted, not *-n*. This accounts for (26) and all other cases where the object is first or second person. The result is that it happens to be the features of the object that are

realized overtly on the verb in these cases. Multiple Agree thus accounts for the cases where the subject is oblique and the object is a local pronoun, solving the intervention issue mentioned above.

The second important question regarding intervention concerns present tense clauses in which the subject is direct but the object is oblique, as in (30).

(30) *hew **wana** di-**n**
he.DIR them.OBL see-PL
He sees them.

What is special about (30) is that agreement with oblique objects is never possible, not even in number. This becomes all the more interesting when it is considered in tandem with the core example of Section 3, namely (31), where the subject is 3PL.OBL and the object is 3SG.DIR.

(31) **Wana** hew di-**n**
They.OBL he.DIR saw-PL
'They saw him.'

Given that oblique NPs are active for agreement and Kurmanji employs Multiple Agree, we expect that the verb could have plural agreement in both (30) and (31). After all, the NPs involved are exactly the same, they merely occupy different positions. Nevertheless, (30) is sharply out, indicating that oblique objects are never accessible for agreement.

We suggest that (30) is ungrammatical due to an absolute locality condition on syntactic operations, not a relativized one like intervention. More specifically, agreement in (30) violates the Phase Impenetrability Condition. Remember that we claimed that v is a phase head in present clauses but not in past clauses in Kurmanji (see (9b)). We used this hypothesis to explain why subjects get oblique (ergative) case in past clauses but not in present clauses. This distinction readily gives us the observed difference in agreement as well. T cannot agree with the object in a present clause despite (27) because the object is not visible; it has been spelled-out, hence removed from the syntactic representation along with the rest of the VP. Therefore, the same factor that explains why there are oblique subjects in past clauses but not in present clauses also explains why there is agreement with objects in past clauses but not present clauses. We consider it an advantage of our theory that it explains this covariance between case and agreement across different clause types in Kurmanji. The fundamental difference between the two clause types is due to the presence or absence of a clause-internal phase boundary. Coupled with Multiple Agree, all the intervention-related questions raised in this section are now answered, with no need for feature-relative intervention.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed a set of seemingly contradictory cases of agreement with and past oblique subjects in Kurmanji. We have argued that, in Kurmanji, agreement with oblique subjects is possible. However, the φ-features that are transferred in an agreement relation depend on the morphological structure of the nominals involved. In particular, language-specific fusion rules which structure nominals play an important role in determining the

agreement morphology on the verb. We have argued that agreement is a two-stage process with a syntactic stage (*Agree*), whereby agreement relations are established, and a PF stage (*Value Transfer*), which applies crucially after the fusion operations. We have also argued that Kurmanji employs Multiple Agree, which voids all the intervention questions stemming from a Relativized Minimality perspective. We conclude that the absolute locality condition (the Phase Impenetrability Condition) is a more substantive condition on agreement relations than Relativized Minimality-type conditions are.

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