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Collective (dis)Agreement: On a 3/4 pattern of British English Collective NPs*

1. The issue: Certain dialects of English, most notably British English (BrE) allow either singular or plural agreement with collective NPs (CNPs henceforth) like *team, committee* and *government.*[1] This is well known, but less commonly noted is that plural agreement is systematically more restricted than singular agreement.

(1) a. The government **is** ruining the economy.
b. The government **are** ruining the economy.

(2) a. A pride **is** hunting zebra on the Serengeti.
b. A pride **are** hunting zebra on the Serengeti.

(3) a. The committee gave **itself** a budget increase.
b. The committee gave **themselves** a pay rise.

(4) a. **This** team is/are destined to win the championship.
b. ***These** team is/are destined to win the championship.

(5) a. **This** government **are** all corrupt.
b. ***These** government are all corrupt.

(1) - (4) show either singular or plural agreement is allowed to be shown on verbs and anaphors, but only singular on demonstratives. (5a) shows singular and plural agreement in the same sentence, and (5b) shows that the ban against plural agreement on demonstratives is a general restriction since verb and floating quantifier clearly indicate plural potential.

The more restrictive nature of plural agreement is seen also in existential constructions (6), scope reconstruction (7) and predicate/subject readings (8):

(6) a. There **is** a committee meeting in there.
b. *There **are** a committee meeting in there.
(Elbourne 1999)

(7) a. A northern team **is** likely to be in the final. ∃ ≫ likely / likely ≫ ∃
b. A northern team **are** likely to be in the final. ∃ ≫ likely / *likely ≫ ∃

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[1] British English is the classic example. Examples are from BrE unless otherwise noted.

(Elbourne 1999)

(8) a. The best committee **is** theirs. committee = subject ✔ / predicate ✔
b. The best committee **are** theirs. committee = subject ✔ / predicate ✘
(Den Dikken 2001)

This cannot simply be ambiguity of lexical entries. CNPs showing singular agreement occur with predicates demanding a (semantically) plural input:

(9) The team is gathering.

Various recent theories have assumed CNPs in BrE to be specified as simultaneously plural and singular, see Elbourne (1999), Den Dikken (2001), Wechsler & Zlatić (2003) and Sauerland (2004a,b).

Having both singular and plural features gives four logically available combinations when there are two targets for agreement in the same sentence:

(10) a. Target 1: singular Target 2: singular
b. Target 1: plural Target 2: plural
c. Target 1: singular Target 2: plural
d. Target 1: plural Target 2: singular.

Depending on how mismatches are evaluated, we should find either that two of these sentences are fine (10a,b), or all are. Problematically, BrE allows *three* out of four[2]:

(11) a. The government has offered itself up for criticism (with this policy).
b. The government have offered themselves / each other up for criticism.
c. The government has offered ?themselves / each other up for criticism.
d. *The government have offered itself up for criticism.

(12) a. The faculty appears to be worrying about itself.
b. The faculty appear to be worrying about themselves / each other.
c. The faculty appears to be worrying about ?themselves / each other.
d. *The faculty appear to be worrying about itself.

⇨ Whilst various approaches have been proposed, there is no approach that unifies (6-9). As we will see, the most successful proposal only captures (7) and (9).

[2] c.f. Pollard & Sag (1994) for a different judgements of the data. Whilst there is a slight degradation in the (c) sentences, speakers systematically make a clear distinction between sentences (c) and (d).

2. Roadmap:

- Failings of previous accounts, §3.1-3.3.
- Description of the crucial structural generalization, §3.4.
- Explaining the generalization, §4.
- Returning to the 3/4 pattern for an explanation, §5.

2.1. The proposal in a nutshell

What I will argue for here is that positing two features on CNPs is correct.[3] Specifically the number feature specification for English CNPs is as in (13) below:

(13) CNP number specification in English
{*u*F:singular, *i*F:plural}

Uninterpretable features are morphosyntactic, but do not contribute to the semantics. Interpretable features are semantic, and in general do not contribute to the syntax or morphology. ϕ-features generally have both a *u*F and an *i*F, but these are generally predictable from each other. BrE is thus special in this regard due to (14):

(14) The semantic number feature in BrE is syntactically active.

The difference between BrE and American English (AmE) is that the semantic number feature is syntactically inactive in AmE (see Landau (2000) for a similar conclusion, but no specific account)[4].

The generalization that underpins (6-8) above will be called *LF-visibility:*

(15) LF-visibility (descriptive generalization, to be formalized below)
With CNPs, plural agreement requires the controller to c-command the target at LF, but singular agreement does not.

(15) as it stands is a (novel here) descriptive generalization, which *must* underpin any explanation of (6-8). In section 4 below, it will be shown how it can be formally derived. The 3/4 patterns will be shown to follow from an economy condition that operates in the syntax:

[3] See Appendix 1 for discussion that this feature specification is true of all dialects of English.

[4] Hazel Pearson (p.c.) points out that Landau's conclusion must be taken with a pinch of salt as the judgements he supports it with are not uniformly agreed upon by BrE speakers. My argument really only rests upon speakers of BrE being more open to agreement with the plural feature than AmE speakers. Landau's conclusion is an obvious way to make this formal but there are perhaps other ways that this could be done if Landau's doesn't pan out.

(16) Valuation Economy
When an element enters more than one Agree relation, the same feature on the controller must be used for all targets of the same type.

3. Why *LF-visibility*?

I concentrate for the time being on the existential, scope asymmetries and predicate/subject alternations seen above in (6-8) above.

3.1. Two types of approach

Type 1 (Den Dikken 2001, Sauerland 2004a,b):There is something about plural agreeing CNPs that precludes them from appearing in existentials, reconstructing for scope and being predicates. If there exists an element of type *x* such that *x* is incompatible with the environments shown in (6-8), plural agreeing CNPs can be analyzed as an element of type *x*.

Type 2 (Elbourne 1999): There is something about the structural position that is common to (6-8) that plural agreeing CNPs find themselves in, such that plural agreement cannot be licensed from there. Plural agreement then fails due to the fact it cannot be licensed, *not* due to any general restriction of plural agreeing CNPs appearing in that position.

3.2 The failure of type 1 approaches

For Den Dikken, plural agreeing CNPs are CNPs that are just singular, but combine with a plural *pro* in apposition. This makes them essentially plural pronouns.

According to Den Dikken:

- Pronouns cannot be the associates in existential constructions.
- Plural pronouns cannot be predicates.[5]

For Sauerland, plural agreeing CNPs are *hidden definites*. BrE allows CNPs to have a plural operator in the D-layer of the singular NP that lowers the group term to its members, the result is a semantic type <e,e>.

According to Sauerland:

- They will not appear in existentials because of the definiteness restriction.
- Definites cannot reconstruct.

However, consider (17):

(17) a. There **is** a committee meeting with **each other** in that room.

[5] Probably not a correct generalization:
(i) a. We have met the enemy and he is **us**.
b. Our parents, our grandparents, they are **us**.
c. There are gods and we are **them**.
(Sentences from Google, via J.D. Bobaljik p.c.)

b. There **is** a team starting to psych **themselves** up in that room, and they don't want to be disturbed.

⇨ **Type 1 theories face a problem.** The CNPs are clearly plural agreeing since they license plural anaphors so they must be available to appear in existentials, but for type 1 approaches they can't be there.

⇨ It **cannot** be a property of plural agreeing CNPs themselves that prevents plural agreement in existentials.

3.3 What type 2 approaches tell us.

Elbourne (1999) is an example of a type 2 approach. For Elbourne, all CNPs in BrE have singular number, and a plural *mereology* feature. Mereology is unable to raise covertly. Thus, following a Chomsky (1995) *there*-replacement theory of existentials, the plural feature on the verb will not be able to be checked off at LF, crashing the derivation.

But, Den Dikken (1995):

(18) a. Some applicants$_i$ seem to each other$_i$ to be eligible for the job.
b. *There seem to each other$_i$ to be some applicants$_i$ eligible for the job.
c. Someone$_i$ seems to his$_i$ mother to be eligible for the job.
d. *There seems to his$_i$ mother to be someone$_i$ eligible for the job.

⇨ Associates must remain low at LF, otherwise there would be nothing wrong with the binding configurations in (18b,d). Therefore, a lack of covert raising of the mereology feature is irrelevant.

Elbourne does capture the scope asymmetries via PF-movement and total reconstruction (see Sauerland & Elbourne 2002 for further discussion). There is no discussion of predicate/subject alternations.

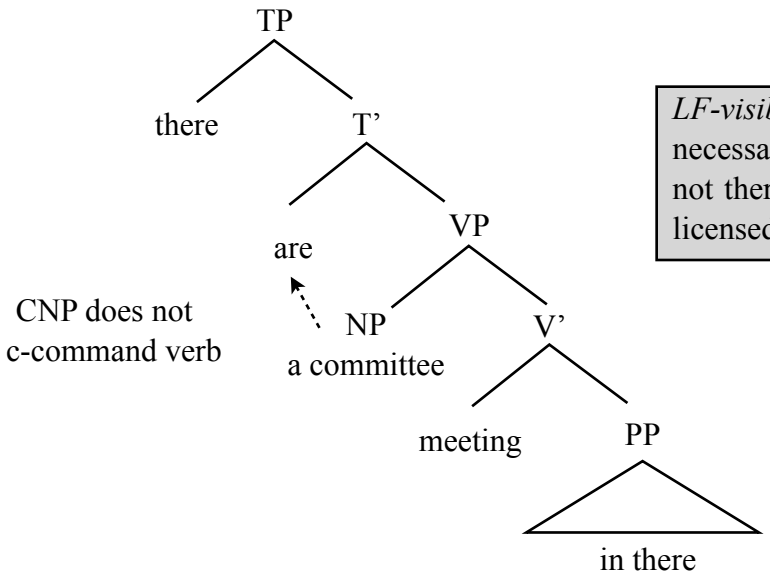
3.4 Getting to the heart of the problem.

None of the accounts so far provide us with good empirical coverage. Once we consider the structures however, we will see that the root of the problem is (15) repeated below:

(15) LF-visibility (descriptive generalization)
With CNPs, plural agreement requires the controller to c-command the target at LF, but singular agreement does not.

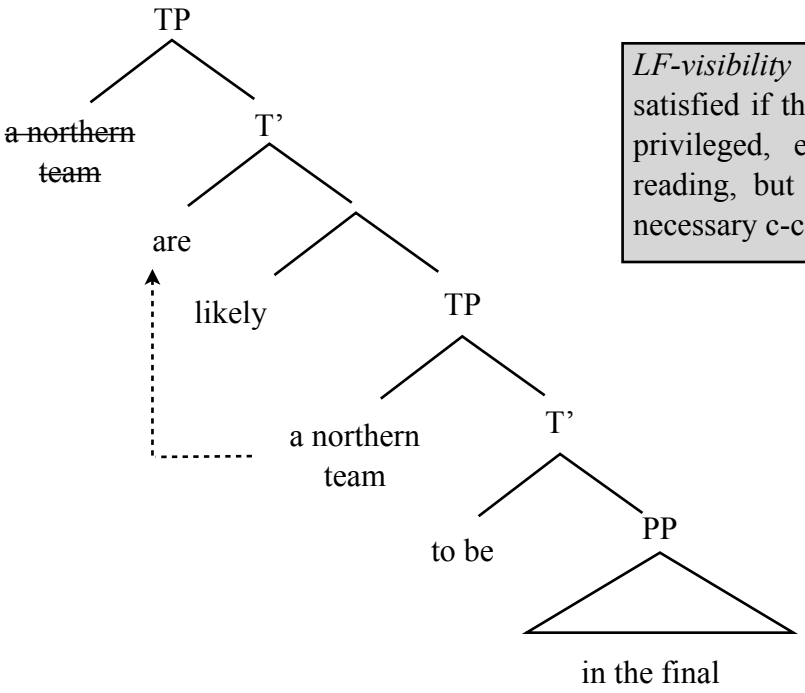
To show that this is the correct generalization, consider the following LF-representations of (6), given in (19), where the associate is low in the structure at LF (see Den Dikken 1995, Bošković 1997 and Bobaljik 2002 for arguments that the associate remains low)

(19) *There are a committee meeting in there.



LF-visibility is violated, because the necessary c-command relationship is not there. Plural agreement cannot be licensed but singular can be.

(20) A northern team are likely to be in the final. (showing the illicit narrow scope LF)



LF-visibility is again violated. It is satisfied if the DP in the higher clause is privileged, explaining the wide scope reading, but reconstruction destroys the necessary c-command relationship.

⇨ Subject/predicate alternations also show a violation of *LF-visibility.*

(21) a. The best committee **is** theirs. committee = subject ✔ / predicate ✔
b. The best committee **are** theirs. committee = subject ✔ / predicate ✘

R1: the best committee belongs to them. (subject reading)
R2: the committee that they belong to is the best committee. (predicate reading)

- Note that (21) really seems to involve an elided possessive structure:

(22) The best committee is their ~~committee~~.

- There are then *two* potential CNPs at LF:

(23) [$_{DP1}$ The best committee] is [$_{DP2}$ their committee]

- I propose that the subject readings of (21a,b) involve standard movement of DP_1 (the deep subject) to surface subject position[6]:

(24) [$_{TP}$ [$_{DP1}$ The best committee]$_i$ is$_k$ [$_{SC}$ t_i [$_{SC'}$ t_k [$_{DP2}$ their ~~committee~~]]]]

- The predicate readings on the other hand are predicate inversion structures. DP_2 raises across the deep subject (DP_1) to become the surface subject[7]:

(25) [$_{TP}$ [$_{DP2}$ The best committee]$_i$ is$_k$ [$_{SC}$ [$_{DP1}$ their ~~committee~~] [$_{SC'}$ t_k t_i]]]

⇨ In the subject readings, the deep subject is also the surface subject. In the predicate readings it is the predicate which is the surface subject whilst the deep subject remains internal to the small clause.

- In inversion structures, it is not necessarily the element that is in Spec,TP that is the controller of agreement on the verb (*contra* Den Dikken 2001):

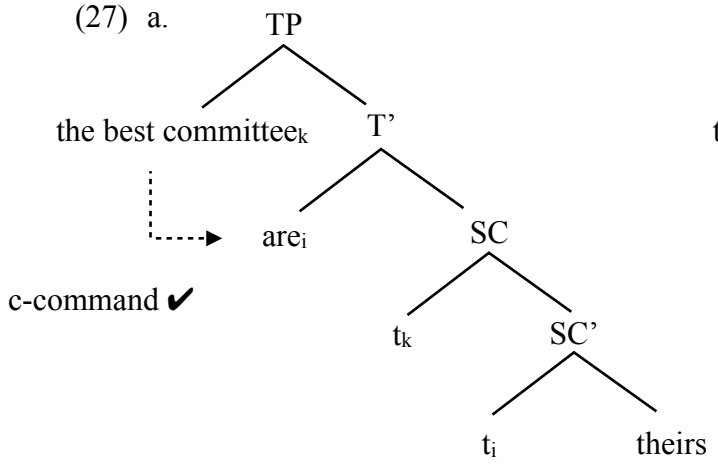
(26) In the garden are [many pretty flowers].

[6] I follow Den Dikken (1997) in assuming that predicate structures involve raising from a small clause. Movement of the verb isn't that important in (27), but is crucial for the predicate inversion structure in (28) as it serves to make the predicate equidistant (Chomsky 1995) from Spec,TP with the subject.

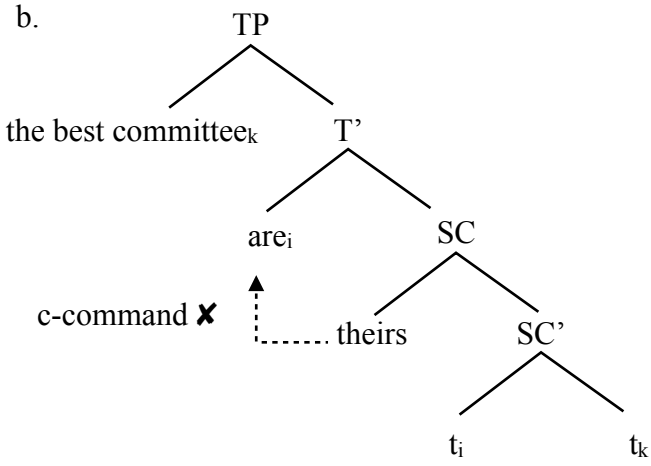
[7] For my analysis to work here, predicate inversion structures must be derived by A-movement, at least initially. There is plenty of evidence that this is the correct approach, see Collins (1997), Moro (1997), Den Dikken (1998) and Landau (2010) for more discussion.

We can now see why predicate readings are not available in (21b), whilst subject readings are. The subject reading LF representation for (21b) is given in (27a), with (27b) the predicate reading LF. **The element that is generated in Spec,SC (the deep subject) is the controller of agreement**[8]:

(27) a.



b.



➪ *LF-visibility* is only violated in (27b), explaining the lack of predicate readings. Both readings are licensed in (21) because singular agreement is not subject to *LF-visibility.*[9]

Note that in all of the structures given above, singular agreement is allowed. Therefore, for singular agreement to be licensed, the controller does not need to c-command the controller at LF.

➪ The difference between the plural and singular agreement does not lie within the features themselves, but rather how the features are accessed by targets for valuation (i.e. the mechanism of valuation must be different for both).

Putting all of this together, along with the assumed feature specification of CNPs, repeated below in (28), we get a revised *LF-visibility* generalization, (29):

(28) CNP number specification in English
{*u*F:singular, *i*F:plural}

[8] Even if it turns out that the predicate is the controller of agreement in 2xDP inversion structures (c.f. Den Dikken 2006), nothing in the analysis changes. Heycock (1995) shows that predicates always reconstruct at LF.

[9] When presenting at ConSOLE I gave the judgement that plural agreement was not possible with locative inversion, which is predicted to be the case with my analysis. That reflected the judgements that I had at the time which said that it was not possible, and had about the status of plural agreement in expletives. However, having spoken with more informants after the presentation it seems that it is in fact acceptable. That is, *out in the hallway **are** a committee* is fine for more speakers than not. This raises interesting questions about locative inversion, which I leave open for future research.

(29) LF-visibility (revised)
Agreement that targets the *i*F feature of BrE CNPs requires the controller to c-command the target at LF.

4. How *LF-visibility*?

We now need to show how to capture this generalization formally. I make the following assumptions:

(30) Agreement is post-syntactic valuation (copying or sharing) of ***u*F** features (Bobaljik 2008).

(31) Post-syntactic agreement does not use the same method of valuation as the syntax (i.e. Agree c.f. Baker 2008).

(32) Agree is downward valuation (*contra* Chomsky 2001). I adopt Wurmbrand's (2011) definition of Reverse Agree given below, see Zeijlstra (2010) for a similar proposal.

(33) Reverse Agree (Wurmbrand 2011)

A feature F: __ on a head α is valued by a feature F: val on β, iff

i. β c-commands α
ii. There is no γ with a valued interpretable feature F such that γ commands α and is c-commanded by β.
iii. α is accessible to β

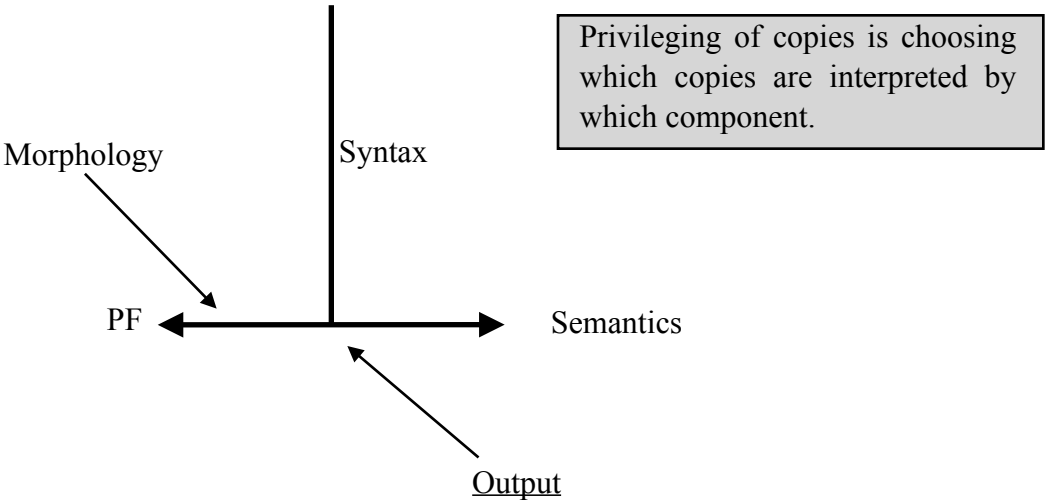
(34) Phases are built in a single-output manner (see Bobaljik's 1995, 2002, 2008 T-model).

(35) (Reverse) Agree operates on LF representations, which are built at the output of syntax to the interfaces by the privileging of copies (see Bobaljik & Wurmbrand 2005).

(36) The semantic number feature (*i*F:plural) in BrE is syntactically active.

⇨ In this system, there is no requirement that *all* features are valued before spell-out. Some features will have to be, for instance anaphors need to be licensed by Agree and so their features are necessarily valued syntactically. Elements that are not obligatorily licensed syntactically however can (but do not need to) wait until morphology to get features valued, there is no question of economy.

(37) Model of the grammar (adapted from Bobaljik 2008)

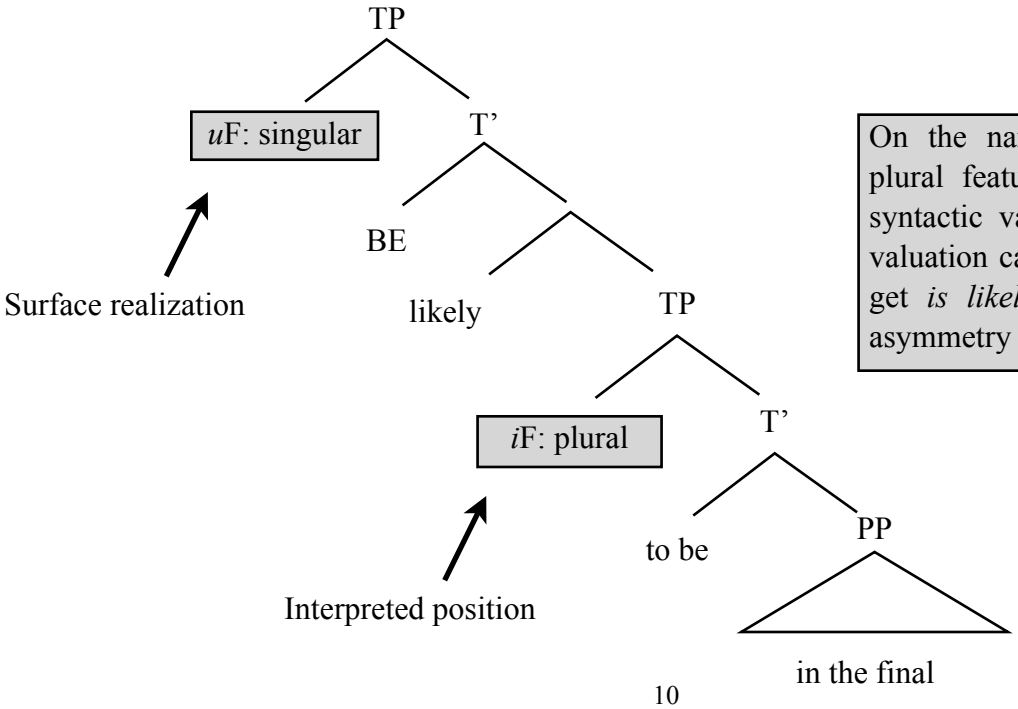


Privileging of copies is choosing which copies are interpreted by which component.

⇨ This system entails *LF-visibility.* The only way to value plural on CNPs is via Agree as the morphological component only sees *u*Fs, not the plural *i*F. Since Agree happens after the privileging of copies, and there is no movement afterward, c-command at LF is guaranteed.

Consider the LF-representation of the narrow scope readings of (7a,b), revised below to show how it looks in the current system (showing only number features of the CNP)

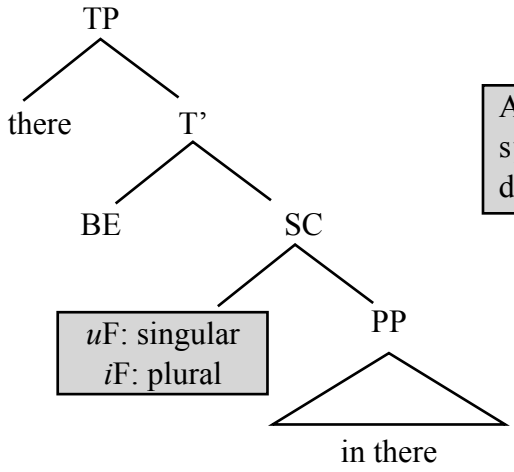
(38) A northern team BE likely to be in the final.



On the narrow scope reading, the *i*F: plural feature is not visible to BE for syntactic valuation. The only possible valuation can be morphological as so we get *is likely*. This derives the scope asymmetry of (7).

- The existentials and subject/predicate alternations also easily fall out:

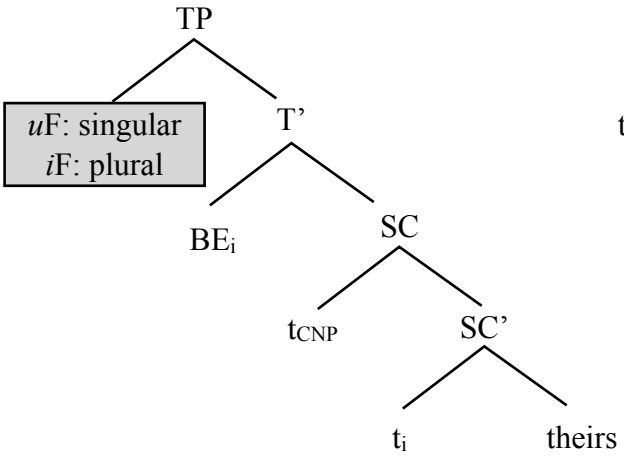
(39) There BE a committee in there.



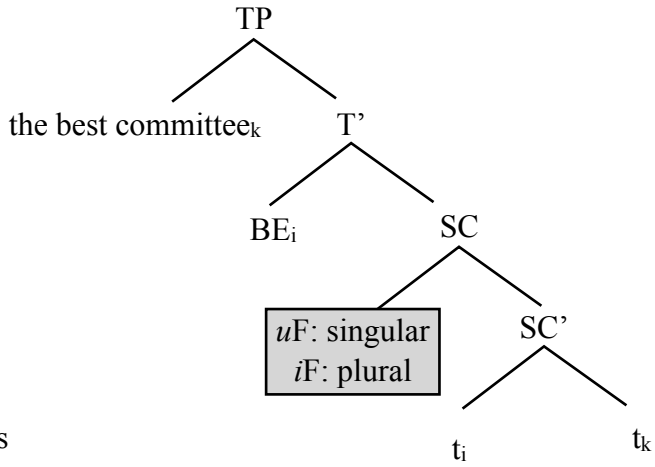
Again, the CNP is inaccessible for syntactic valuation so plural is disallowed.

(40) a. The best committee **is** theirs. committee = subject ✔ / predicate ✔
b. The best committee **are** theirs. committee = subject ✔ / predicate ✘

Subject reading



Predicate reading



⇨ Thus, in contrast to previous approaches, we predict exactly where plural agreement is allowed, and why it is so restricted with respect to singular agreement. The real difference is not in the features, but rather the mechanism of valuation.

5. Back to the 3/4 pattern.

(41) a. The government has offered itself up for criticism (with this policy).
b. The government have offered themselves / each other up for criticism.
c. The government has offered ?themselves / each other up for criticism.
d. *The government have offered itself up for criticism.

- Uniform feature valuation but default realization of the verb?

(42) Valuation Economy
When an element enters more than one Agree relation, the same feature on the controller must be used for all targets of the same type.

However, if we adopt *valuation economy* as holding **within the syntax**, the 3/4 pattern simply falls out from the system outlined in the previous section:

- (41a) is syntactically valued singular on the anaphor and either syntactically or morphologically valued singular on the auxiliary.
- (41b) is syntactically valued plural on the anaphor **and** syntactically valued plural on the auxiliary (in accordance with *valuation economy*).
- (41c) is syntactically valued plural on the anaphor and morphologically valued singular on the auxiliary (no violation of *valuation economy*).

⇨ (41d) is simply underivable. As the anaphor values singular in the syntax, there is no way for the verb to value plural without violating *valuation economy.*

6. Conclusions

In this talk I have argued that:

- Plural agreement from BrE CNPs is more restricted, but in a highly predictable manner.

- This restriction cannot come from a plural element specific to plural agreeing CNPs.

- Neither can it come from a behavioral difference between singular and plural features.

- It is the *mechanism of agreement* that is the source of the restriction.
  - Singular agreement of CNPs is post-syntactic and so able to look at the whole structure.
  - Plural agreement is syntactic, and so can only be in a downward valuation configuration.
  - These give us *LF-visibility,* which is the generalization that must be explained theoretically.

- Given the assumptions (30-36), we can unify all the facts under discussion, providing empirical coverage far greater than previous accounts of BrE CNP agreement.

Appendix - Plural agreement and CNPs of English

Elbourne (1999), Den Dikken (2001) and Sauerland (2004a,b) all argue that CNPs in BrE that agree plural are all different than their AmE counterparts in that they have an additional plural element that allows plural agreement to be licensed. This would then suggest that dialects of English fall neatly into two camps, those that do allow plural agreement from CNPs and those that don't. Other dialects of English such as Canadian English are then problematic because they do allow plural agreement but not quite as widely as BrE.

(1) Allow plural agreement: British English
Disallow plural agreement: American English

In (14) above I made the assumption that the semantically plural feature in BrE is active for syntactic agreement. This leaves the door open for a unified featural specification of CNPs in English, with the dialects differing in their openness to license plural agreement. This line of reasoning suggests that the dialects of English fall on a continuum of resistance to plural agreement, instead of the binary camps above.

← most resistant ---------- least resistant →

⇧ American English ⇧ Canadian English ⇧ British English

Australian English? New Zealand English?

Levin (2001) provides an extensive corpus study of the agreement properties of CNPs in AmE and BrE, but also Australian English (AusE). Interestingly, AusE shows this status in between AmE and BrE in not allowing plural agreement as freely as BrE, but more freely than AmE, confirming the continuum view of English:

(2)

	NYT				Ind				SMH			
	Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Verbs	3149	**97**	84	**3**	2260	**77**	683	**23**	1890	**90**	216	**10**
Relative Pronouns	537	**76**	165	**24**	417	**59**	293	**41**	367	**74**	131	**26**
Personal Pronouns	941	**68**	442	**32**	477	**44**	616	**56**	457	**61**	289	**39**

Table abbreviations: NYT = New York Times, Ind = The Independent (UK), SMH = Sydney Morning Herald.

With this in mind, we would expect that AmE has the same corpus distribution patterns of agreement as British English though at a lower frequency. This would be because plural

agreement isn't generally available intrasententially due to the syntactically inactive plural feature. However, Dowty & Jacobson (1988:101) note that in instances where semantic and morphosyntactic features differ in value, semantic agreement becomes more frequent the further away it is from the controller:

> "... it has been observed that in grammatical-gender languages the gender of a pronoun in a discourse may indeed deviate from that of its antecedent in certain cases, especially if widely separated from it. The most common change is for the later pronouns to take on the natural gender (i.e. sex or animacy) of their referent, instead of the grammatical gender of the antecedent."

We might then expect two things:

1. Plural agreement is shown in AmE, but at a much lower rate than BrE, (3,4).
2. Plural agreement gets more likely in both dialects as the target gets further from the controller (5).

Levin's data shows both these to be borne out (note that pronouns are not subject to Agree):

(3) BrE

	Ind				BNC			
	Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Verbs	2260	**77**	683	**23**	1414	**68**	671	**32**
Relative Pronouns	417	**59**	293	**41**	115	**42**	162	**58**
Personal Pronouns	477	**44**	616	**56**	170	**28**	437	**72**

BNC = British National Corpus

(4) AmE

	NYT				LSAC			
	Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Verbs	3149	**97**	84	**3**	476	**91**	48	**9**
Relative Pronouns	537	**76**	165	**24**	11	**26**	32	**74**
Personal Pronouns	941	**68**	442	**32**	14	**6**	225	**94**

LSAC = Longman Spoken American Corpus

Note also that the data pattern exactly as one would expect given Corbett's (1979) Agreement Hierarchy (Levin 2001).

(5) Pronominal agreement Vs distance from controller.

	Same clause				Same sentence different clause				Next sentence				Next sentence but one			
	Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
NYT	436	**84**	86	**16**	443	**66**	225	**34**	60	**32**	127	**68**	0	**0**	3	**100**
Ind	214	**51**	209	**49**	242	**45**	292	**55**	21	**16**	107	**84**	0	**0**	5	**100**
SMH	222	**76**	70	**24**	222	**59**	152	**41**	12	**16**	63	**84**	0	**0**	4	**100**
LSAC	6	**43**	8	**57**	6	**3**	176	**97**	2	**5**	41	**95**	0	**-**	0	**-**
BNC	80	**56**	63	**44**	82	**22**	296	**78**	8	**11**	67	**89**	0	**0**	11	**100**

Given the similarities between the dialects, and the fact that CNPs are interpreted in the same way across the dialects, we can then conclude that there is a uniform feature specification for CNPs across English. The true difference between AmE and BrE is not then the fact that BrE CNPs have some plural encoding AmE CNPs lack, but rather the speakers of BrE allow CNPs to license plural agreement more freely due to the fact that the plural feature is syntactically active in BrE.

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