Verbal agreement in Spanish sentences with partitives

ANA AGUILAR GUEVARA

Abstract

In sentences like La mayoría de los dentistas recomiendan Oral-B ‘Most of professional dentists recommend Oral-B’ the verbal inflection doesn’t show the same grammatical features of gender, number or person as those of the heads of the principal noun phrases. Instead, it agrees with the noun phrases preceded by de.

The current paper outlines an explanation of this phenomenon within the framework of Optimality Theory, based on a hierarchy of conflicting constraints, in which I have included the semantic and syntactic conditions under which this sort of ‘non-agreement’ takes place.

1. Introduction

In sentences (1), (2) and (3) neither the verbal inflection of (1) nor the clitic in the direct object (2) or indirect object (3) show the same grammatical features of gender, number or person as those of the heads of the principal noun phrases. Instead, these three forms agree with the noun phrases (NP) preceded by de:

(1) a. La mayoría de los profesionales dentales recomiendan Oral-B.
   ‘Most of professional dentists recommend Oral-B.’

   b. Solo la mitad de los habitantes acuden a las urnas.
   ‘Only the half of the inhabitants go to the polls.’

   c. Gracias a aquella herencia, quedaron resueltos el resto de sus problemas.
   ‘Thanks to that inheritance, the rest of his problems were resolved.’

(2) a. Al resto de las invitadas no las incluyeron en la lista.
   ‘They did not include the rest of the guests on the list.’

   b. A la mayoría de los adolescentes no los escuchan en sus familias.
   ‘Families do not listen to the majority of adolescents.’

(3) a. A la mayor parte de los ingenieros les quitaron los aguinaldos.
   ‘They cleared most part of the engineers their Christmas bonuses.’

   b. A la totalidad de los asalariados se les quedaron resueltas sus problemas.
   ‘They resolved all of his problems.’

© 2007 IUJOI, Irene Gil, Héctor Fernández, Raquel González
otorgó la prima correspondiente.

‘They granted the appropriate bonus to the salaried workers.’

c. Al resto de los aficionados el canal les permitió mirar el partido desde las gradas.

‘The channel allowed the rest of the fans to watch the game from the stands.’

This fact is obvious when the grammatical features of the main NP and the NP preceded by de are different; specifically, when the number of the second NP is plural and the first one is singular, as the above examples show.

This work is based on the assumption that verbal agreement takes place by means of verbal inflection in the case of the subject and by means of accusative and dative clitics in the case of direct and indirect objects respectively (Suñer 1988, Enrique 1997 and Aguilar, Aguilar and Arellanes 2004).

Verbal agreement is established with a NP preceded by de when there is a partitive relation between the two nouns found in the argument.

The current paper outlines an explanation of this phenomenon within the framework of Optimality Theory (OT), based on a hierarchy of conflicting constraints, in which I have included the semantic and syntactic conditions under which this sort of ‘non-agreement’ takes place.

In the first part of the paper I will carry out a brief exploration of the structure of the sentences where the phenomenon occurs, focusing on the interior of complex noun phrases with which agreement is established. Subsequently I will explain the semantic aspects of the partitive constructions in question, which I consider relevant for clarifying the context in which the verbal non-agreement analysed here occurs.

In the second part I will propose restrictions and a hierarchy for Spanish to explain the phenomenon.

2. Syntactic and semantic context in which the verbal non-agreement occurs

2.1. Structure of the complex sentence in terms of subject, direct object and indirect object

Phrases with the partitive interpretation such as (1), (2) and (3) have the same appearance as those with a relationship and a genitive case in their interior, such as (4):

(4) la boda de los príncipes de Asturias

‘the wedding of the princes of Asturias’

That is, they are phrases containing a noun (N1), head of the main NP (NP1) plus another noun phrase (NP2) preceded by de. This NP2 contains the noun we shall call N2 from now on.

Though the order and the components seem to be identical, structurally they are not the same as sentences (1), (2) and (3) (see proofs and analysis in Jakendoff 1977, Gutiérrez-Bravo 1999 and Zagona 2002). In fact, proof of this could be that, precisely, a verb does not agree with the head of an NP2 like that in (4) without ungrammatical consequences, unlike in (1), (2) and (3):

(5) *La boda de los príncipes de Asturias causan gran revuelo entre los europeos.

‘The wedding of the Princes of Asturias cause a great stir amongst the Europeans.’
The reason is that the NP2 of (4) is an adjunct (sister of N’, not of the head of NP1) in which the preposition de prevents it from being visible and hence accessible to verbal inflection (Vos 1999).

Therefore, it seems that a necessary condition for establishing verbal agreement with the features of an NP2 noun is that it must be in a position of visibility, presumably that of a complement (Vos 1999). The following simplified tree diagram illustrates this:

(6)

```
FN1
  /\  
 N'  
 /   
N1 /\FN2
  / \N' 
  /   
 N2
```

Setting aside the variety of analyses that exist for partitive structures, (such as Jakendoff 1977, Ritter 1991, Brucart 1993, Parodi 1994, Barker 1998, and Vos 1999, whose differences lie in the status assigned to NP1, NP2 and to de), we may suppose that the only structural difference between the partitive phrases which appear in (1), (2) and (3) and the genitive structure of (4) is the position of NP2: in the genitive structure of (4) the NP2 is in an adjunct position, whereas in the partitive structures of (1), (2) and (3) it is a complement. Complex phrases are also possible in Spanish in which the head of the NP2 in the complementary position does not trigger verbal agreement:

(7) *La construcción de las columnas han llevado más tiempo del esperado.

‘The construction of the columns have taken longer than anticipated.’

So, there must be some other kind of difference between the complex noun phrases of examples (1), (2) and (3) and those of (4) and (7). I propose that this contrast is related to the lexical properties of the nouns composing these complex noun phrases with which the verbal agreement is established. We shall see which they are.

2.2. Semantic properties of the phrase leading to verbal non-agreement

An obvious semantic difference between a complex phrase such as la construcción de las columnas ‘the construction of the columns’ and another such as la mayoría de las personas ‘the majority of the people’ is that in the second (but not in the first) there is a set-subset relation between the meanings of the two nouns it is composed of. This relation, which we call partitive, can be formed in Spanish with certain nouns such as parte, mitad, tercio, totalidad, resto ‘part, half, third, totality, rest’ (when heads of the NP1) which are quantified expressions. These partitives in their turn form part of a vast group of nouns in Spanish, which are distinguished from common nouns such as love, space and John by their defective syntactic behaviour and for containing a quantitative component in their lexical conceptual structure. This group includes nouns indicating group (montón ‘pile’), measurement (litro ‘litre’), container (taza ‘cup’), type (especie ‘species’), quantity (barbaridad ‘loads’) and, of course, portion (fracción ‘portion’) (see chapter 3 of Vos 1999 for more details of the characteristics of each class of these nouns).
Partitive nouns (PartN) are those under study in this paper, specifically those which I have called absolute (listed in (8)) because, as opposed to non-absolute partitives (in (9)), they denote a unique part of a set.

(8) la mayoría / el resto / la totalidad / la mitad (no siempre) / el veinte por ciento de los diputados
   ‘the majority / the rest / all / half (not always) / twenty per cent of the deputies’

(9) una mitad / un tercio / una fracción / una parte de los diputados
   ‘half / a third / a portion / part of the deputies’

Although all the members of the group of PartN have an inherent characteristic of cardinality (Vos 1999), only absolute partitives do not allow of quantification, since denoting a unique part of a subset implies that there cannot be more than one ‘unique part’ in the subset. Compare (10) and (11):

(10) *dos totalidades/*dos mayorías/?? dos mitades 3/ de los diputados
   ‘two wholes /two majorities / two halves of the deputies’

(11) dos tercios / dos partes / dos fracciones de los diputados
   ‘two thirds / two parts / two portions of the deputies’

For the non-absolute partitives to become absolute they need to be accompanied by a modifier which provides them with the extra characteristic of absoluteness:

(12) a. la mayor parte de los diputados
   ‘the most part of the deputies’

1 For reasons of space I have limited my analysis to sentences with absolute partitive nouns and I have left out occasions of similar non-agreement, identified in the literature, such as certain constructions with collective and quantitative nouns:

(i) Un demonial de señoras traen gelatina.
   ‘A horde of ladies bring jelly.’

(ii) Al grupo de los García los traicionaron en el Norte.
   ‘They betrayed the Garcia group in the north.’

   (Soler 2001 and Vos 1999)

or indeterminate pronouns such as (iii):

(iii) Nadie de los que se encuentran en activo son capaces de torear de ese modo.
   ‘None of those active are able to bullfight in that way.’

as well as other classes of non-agreement which explicitly implicate the grammatical person such as (iv):

(iv) A la mayoría de nosotros nos tocaron abrigos azules.
   ‘Most of us got blue coats.’

Nevertheless, I believe that a longer version of this work would be able to account for these examples along the same lines that I have developed here, integrating other restrictions to the hierarchy which I propose in the conclusion.

2 Partitive nouns, together with those of quantity and those of size have a cardinality component in their meaning which allows them to be freely present in partitive structures of the kind found in (1), (2) and (3), unlike nouns of container, group or species which to be present in a partitive structure N1 + de + NP2 require an element which provides them with the feature of cardinality that they lack (Vos 1999). Compare (ia) and (ib):

(i) a. un lote / un puñado de niños
   ‘a bunch / a handful of kids’

   b. unas *(dos) cajas / unas *(dos) parejas / unos *(dos) tipos de calcetines
   ‘some (two) boxes / some (two) couples / some (two) kinds of socks’

3 The noun ‘half’ may be understood as a non-absolute partitive in situations of contrast such as half the apples were still edible but the other half had to be thrown out.
Verbal agreement in Spanish sentences with partitives

b. El primer tercio de los diputados
   ‘The first third of the deputies’

c. La única fracción activa de los diputados
   ‘The only active portion of the deputies’

The lexical properties of the absolute partitive nouns that have been described (cardinality and denoting a unique subset of a set) make the subset-set relation established between these NP1 head nouns and the NP2 nouns special. It is a relation that does not exist in all the partitive structures and which is characterised by two properties. The first property is the presupposition of existence of what is denoted by NP2, that is, the set of which the nominal of NP2 denotes a subset (Vanikka and Maling 1996, Hoeksema 1996). The second property is the definiteness of this set.

To prove the presence of each of these two properties in the NP2 it is necessary to do two things. For definiteness it is enough to observe the ungrammaticality of phrases with indefinite NP2s. See a’, b’ and c’:

(13) a. el cincuenta por ciento de los amigos
   ‘fifty per cent of the friends’
   a’. *el cincuenta por ciento de amigos
   ‘fifty percent of friends’

b. el resto de las personas
   ‘the rest of the people’
   b’. *el resto de personas
   ‘the rest of people’

c. la mayor parte de los deportistas
   ‘the most part of the sportsmen’
   c’. *la mayor parte de deportistas
   ‘the most part of sportsmen’

To establish the supposed existence of what is indicated by the NP2 we subject the whole complex noun phrase, NP1 (N1 + de + NP2), to predication with the existential verb haber ‘there is’. If the results are ungrammatical, we may suppose the existence of what the complete phrase denotes, given that it makes no sense to predicate the existence (with the verb haber) of something we suppose to exist. See the results of (14):

(14) a. *Hay el resto de los habitantes.
   ‘There are the rest of the inhabitants.’

b. *Hay la mayor parte de los sobres.
   ‘There are the majority of the envelopes.’

If the “whole” denoted by the NP2 exists, then the “part” denoted by the NP1 must also exist (Vanikka and Maling 1996). For this reason absolute partitive nouns cannot be preceded by indefinite determiners:

(15) a. *un resto de los diputados
   ‘a rest of the deputies’

b. *una totalidad de los enemigos
   ‘an all of the enemies’

c. *una mayor parte de los enemigos
   ‘a most part of the enemies’

All the above-described behaviours are in turn related to another property of the partitive relation contained in examples such as (1), (2) and (3) and which determines, in my hypothesis,
whether verbal agreement is established with N1 or N2. It is a question of referentiality. Let us explain.

In a noun phrase composed of a partitive N1 and an NP2 with an N2 denoting a presupposed and defined set, referentiality resides in NP2. The head of NP1 only takes on the features (reflected in the determiner) the NP2 possesses. In other words the only noun with autonomous referentiality in the complex phrases we are studying is the head of NP2.

The nouns which may be an N1, such as absolute partitives, possess a quantifying component in their lexical conceptual structure without them really having to refer to a group or portion (Vos 1999). In such a case, when they are interpreted as quantifiers (and not as real partitives), these nouns do not possess autonomous referentiality. Whereas, when they are interpreted as elements denoting real sets or portions (in which case their quantifying value is part of this denotation) they do possess autonomous referentiality.

Some research has associated this fact with the “lexical plenitude” of this type of nouns (Brucart 1993) and with their assignment to two groups within the category of nouns: functional nouns and lexical nouns (see Vos 1999 chap. 4). In general, if nouns denote real portions or subsets it is because they are lexical nouns (as are destrucción and ciudad as well, for example) with a descriptive content that includes a quantity; by contrast, if these nouns are really only bringing an indefinite quantification to the meaning of the complex noun phrase such as la mayoría de los perros ‘most of the dogs’, then they are functional nouns without descriptive content (Vos 1999).

The lexical content of nouns is associated with referentiality insofar as those which possess descriptive content may function referentially. Williams (1981; taken up by Vos 1999) associates the capacity for referentiality to the presence of an R-feature in these nouns.

Contexts in which nouns are referentially autonomous mean those nouns possess the R-feature. Contexts in which they do not really denote any subgroup or portion of another group but rather quantify indefinitely the elements of a set mean they do not possess the R-feature and are not interpreted referentially.

How can contexts in which partitive nouns do not possess the R-feature and are not referentially autonomous be distinguished from those contexts where they do possess the R-feature and are referentially autonomous? I propose that it is precisely verbal agreement with N1 or N2 that serves as evidence for this. To explain this we shall look at the distributive reading that may be made of the sentences with partitives we are studying. Let us see.

For example, in a sentence such as la mitad de las estudiantes llevaron un juguete a la escuela ‘half the students brought a toy to school’ the aptest reading is that each one of the students brought a toy to school and not that all together as a group, as a ‘half’, they brought the one toy. Nevertheless, even in sentences where the group sense of the event predominates, such as in sentences (16a) and (16b), it is still understood that each of the members of the subset carried out the action:

(16) a. La mayoría de los presos organizaron una fiesta de fin de año.
   ‘Most of the prisoners organised an end of year party.’ = each of the prisoners organised the end of year party

   b. El resto de los soldados empujaron un tanque los últimos dos metros.
   ‘The rest of the soldiers pushed a tank the last two metres.’ = each of the soldiers pushed the tank the last two metres

Considering what has been said about the lexical value and the referential properties of partitive nouns, we can attribute this reading to the fact that in these sentences la mitad, la mayoría and el resto (‘half’, ‘most’ and ‘the rest’) are only quantifying las estudiantes, los presos and los soldados (‘the students’, ‘the prisoners’ and ‘the soldiers’) respectively and do not possess descriptive content or referential autonomy; this is why the verb agrees with N2 and not N1. If this is the case, we may then search for a context in which the partitive noun really denotes a subgroup or a group. We may expect that in this context, the distributive reading previously
outlined will not be possible, nor the agreement with N2, given that N1 has its own descriptive content and referentiality. These contexts are illustrated in (17). As may be seen, *la mitad de los habitantes de Ámsterdam está compuesta de turcos, chinos y marroquíes* ‘a half of the inhabitants of Amsterdam is made up of Turks, Chinese and Moroccans’ ≠ each one of the inhabitants of Amsterdam is made up of Turks, Chinese and Moroccans, because in this case the predication denoted by the verb is only possible if the noun functioning as the subject is a collective; therefore the distributive reading is cancelled and the N1 really denotes a subset.

(17) a. *Al menos la mitad de los habitantes de Ámsterdam está compuesta de turcos, chinos y marroquíes.*
‘At least a half of the inhabitants of Amsterdam is made up of Turks, Chinese and Moroccans.’ ≠ each one of the inhabitants of Amsterdam is made up of Turks, Chinese and Moroccans.

b. *La totalidad de los habitantes de Ámsterdam apenas constituye el seis por ciento de toda la población holandesa.*
‘All of the inhabitants of Amsterdam barely makes up six per cent of the whole population of Holland.’ ≠ each one of the inhabitants of Amsterdam makes up six per cent of the whole population of Holland.

In this case, we may say that N1s are referentially autonomous and thanks to this verbal agreement with N2s is wholly disfavoured:

(18) a. *Al menos la mitad de los habitantes de Ámsterdam está compuestos de turcos, chinos y marroquíes.*
‘At least a half of the inhabitants of Amsterdam are made up of Turks, Chinese and Moroccans.’

b. *La totalidad de los habitantes de Ámsterdam apenas constituyen el seis por ciento de toda la población holandesa.*
‘All of the inhabitants of Amsterdam barely make up six per cent of the whole population of Holland.’

In conclusion, verbal agreement in Spanish can be established with the head of the NP2 of a complex phrase with subject, direct object and indirect object, if the NP1 noun is a partitive which quantifies the elements denoted by the NP2, does not refer by itself to a group (as in (1), (2) and (3)) and, therefore, its referential value depends on the referential value of the NP2.

3. The syntactic and semantic context in which verbal non-agreement occurs: constraints in conflict

As we have seen previously, verbal agreement with the grammatical features of the head of a noun phrase preceded by de occurs under two conditions:

I. When the argument with which agreement is established is a complex noun phrase composed of an N1 and an NP2 and the latter occupies a position in which its features are as visible and accessible to the verb as those of the N1.

II. When this complex noun phrase has a partitive interpretation and has an NP1 with a supposedly functional noun, with no descriptive lexical content, which only quantifies the elements denoted by the noun in the NP2 and is not capable of being interpreted referentially. In other words, the NP2 noun lacks the R-feature.
In the following I formalize these two contexts under the system of constraints required by the Optimality Theory.

As I have said, I am assuming that verbal agreement takes place for subjects by means of inflection of the verb, and for objects by means of accusative and dative clitics which accompany it in duplicative constructions (see Suñer 1988; Enrique 1997; Aguilar, Aguilar and Arellanes 2004 to see the contexts in which verbal agreement with objects takes place).

Optimality Theory is based on the principle that what distinguishes one language from another is the difference in the way opposing forces interact, formalized as universal and violable constraints. Constraints tend to enter into conflict and when this happens it is because it is necessary to violate one to satisfy another. Therefore, a language has as a grammar a hierarchy of the same constraints which all languages share, which differs from that of another language, since the latter will have another grammar; the way in which these universal and violable constraints are organised into a hierarchy is determined by the bearing which these have on the final output.

Within the universal restrictions on languages there exists a group which favours the presence of mechanisms for establishing verbal agreement and referencing with the argument of a sentence (see e.g. Woolford 2001).

It is also to be expected that constraints exist to prescribe the way in which verbal agreement and referencing should occur, including in particular the relation between the verb and the noun phrase it corresponds to.

Spanish makes verbal agreement with subject and objects with the head of the NP found in the interior of these as can be seen in (19).

(19) a. Las niñas dejan sus abrigos cerca de la escalera.
   ‘The girls leave their coats near the stairs.’

b. A la abuelita de Floris le convino el trato.
   ‘The agreement suited Floris’s grandma.’

c. A mis hermanos pequeños los quiero como si fueran mis tesoros.
   ‘I love my little brothers as if they were my treasures.’

If this noun phrase is complex, the verb responds, in most cases, to the grammatical features of the head of the principal noun phrase, NP1.

(20) a. Mi necesidad de amor la controlo con helado.
   ‘I control my need for love with ice cream’

b. Las pinturas de Picasso están chuecas.
   ‘The Picasso paintings are squint.’

c. Mi miedo a los exámenes no tuvo límite.
   ‘My fear in the exams was unlimited.’

d. Solo a los hombres en edad temprana les dan esas indecisiones.
   ‘Men are only so indecisive at an early age.’

e. El regalo para María lo compramos en Pátzcuaro.
   ‘We bought the present for Maria in Patzcuaro.’
Verbal agreement in Spanish sentences with partitives

f. *A la fe en los santos le atribuimos la sanación* to the faith.FEM.SG in the saints CLIT. DAT.3SG attribute the healing de los niñoatos.
of the little.children
‘We attributed the healing of the little children to faith in the saints.’

Considering the general behaviour that can be observed in (19) and (20), I can formulate the following restriction (21):

(21) AGRPRNCFN: Verbal agreement with the features of the head of the principal noun phrase in an argument is required.

Such a restriction accounts for the majority of cases of verbal agreement in Spanish: cases in which there is only one available noun because there is only one NP (such as *las niñas dejan sus abrigos* ‘the girls leave their coats’) but also in complex cases in which the grammatical features of NP1 and NP2 are accessible (such as *la destrucción de las columnas sucede lentamente* ‘the destruction of the columns takes place slowly’), but the NP1, as the head of the principal NP, is the one which generates verbal agreement, as required by the restriction in (21).

Nevertheless, the examples in (1), (2) and (3) violate this restriction given that verbal agreement is established with N2, which is not the head of the principal NP. To explain these, I propose that in Spanish there is a restriction which overrules AGRPRNCFN, and as a consequence allows grammaticality for a candidate such as *la mayoría de los dentistas recomiendan Oral-B* ‘most dentists recommend Oral-B’. Such a restriction must be related to the particular situation in which an NP2 in a complex argument generates verbal agreement (see 2.2). That is, when there is a subset-set relation established between the N1 and N2 nouns, and the N1, unlike the N2, does not contain descriptive content, but only quantifies the elements denoted by the N2 and lacks the R-feature which allows it to be interpreted referentially. For its part, the N2 enjoys lexical plenitude and referential autonomy.

As such, we may say that the exercise of verbal agreement with referentially autonomous nouns is a priority in Spanish. In OT terms, there is a dominant constraint that disfavours agreement with nouns lacking the R-feature in the input because these do not have referential interpretation. This restriction is formulated in (22):

(22) *REFNO-REFNOM: Verbal agreement is prohibited with nouns which cannot be interpreted referentially.

Given that this restriction automatically conflicts with what is required by the restriction in (14), as shown by sentences such as (1), (2) and (3) in which the verb does not agree with the noun in the principal NP, we must suppose that *REFNO-REFNOM overrules AGRPRNCFN in Spanish, as these examples demonstrate. Let us see what happens when we subject a candidate such as these to evaluation according to the hierarchy we have proposed so far:

(23) Input: <pagar (x, y; z), x=el resto(_(c)) de los inquilinos(Rsg-R), y= la renta(Rsg-R), z=a tiempo>

Glosses:

a. *El resto de los inquilinos pagan la renta a tiempo.*
the rest.MASC.SG of the renters.MASC.PL pay.3PL the rent on time
‘The rest of the renters pay the rent on time.’

b. *El resto de los inquilinos paga la renta a tiempo.*
the rest.MASC.SG of the renters.MASC.PL pay.3SG the rent on time
‘The rest of the renters pays the rent on time.’
*REFNO-REFNOM and AGRPRNCFN are in conflict in sentences such as *el resto de los inquilinos pagan la renta a tiempo* ‘the rest of the tenants pay the rent on time’ because AGRPRNCFN requires agreement with the head of the principal noun phrase *el resto* ‘the rest’ and so disfavours the verb agreeing with *los inquilinos* ‘the tenants’; the other, *REFNO-REFNOM* prohibits reference to a noun which does not have an R-feature and so automatically disallows its establishing agreement with the N1 and favours this occurring with the N2 (*los inquilinos*), which is grammatical. For this reason, only by *REFNO-REFNOM* overruling AGRPRNCFN can we explain a result like *el resto de los inquilinos pagan la renta a tiempo* ‘the rest of the tenants pay the rent on time’.

Something similar happens in tables (24) and (25), except that these evaluate candidates with verbal agreement with the direct and indirect objects, respectively:

(24) Input: <tratar (x, y; z), x=pro, y= la mayoría(-) de esos enfermos(Rsg-R), y=(tópico), z=muy mal>

Glosses:

a. *A la mayoría de esos enfermos los tratan muy mal.*
   to the majority. FEM of those patients. MASC.PL CLIT.ACC.MASC.3PL treat very bad
   ‘They treat the majority of those patients very badly.’

b. *A la mayoría de esos enfermos la tratan muy mal.*
   to the majority. FEM of those patients. MASC.PL CLIT.ACC.FEM.3SG treat very bad
   ‘They treat the majority of those patients very badly.’

(25) Input: <conceder (x, y, z), x=pro, y= los permisos, z= el resto(-) de los alumnos(Rsg-R), z=(tópico)>

Glosses:

a. *Al resto de los alumnos les concedieron los permisos.*
   to the rest. MASC.SG of the students CLIT.DAT.MASC.3PL granted the permissions
   ‘They granted students the permissions to the rest of the students.’

b. *Al resto de los alumnos les concedieron los permisos.*
   to the rest. MASC.SG of the students CLIT.DAT.MASC.3SG granted the permissions
   ‘They granted the permissions to the rest of the students.’
Verbal agreement in Spanish sentences with partitives

So, with the hierarchy of restrictions prevailing in the tables sentences such as *el resto de tus hermanos va a la escuela* ‘the rest of your siblings goes to school’, where verbal agreement is established with the N1, may be discarded. Nevertheless, sentences such as (26b) *la destrucción de las columnas ocurre hoy* ‘the destruction of the columns happens today’ are not ungrammatical given that here, the NP1 noun and the NP2 noun are provided with the R-feature in the input and so verbal agreement with N1 does not violate *REFNO-REFNOM*. Meanwhile verbal agreement with N2 as illustrated by candidate a. does violate the following restriction in the hierarchy. See (26):

(26) Input: <ocurrir (x; y), x= la destrucción(Rsg-R) de las columnas(Rsg-R), y=ayer >

Glosses:

a. *La destrucción de las columnas ocurre hoy.*
   the destruction.FEM.SG of the columns happen.3PL today
   ‘The destruction of the columns happen today.’

b. *La destrucción de las columnas ocurre hoy.*
   the destruction.FEM.SG of the columns happen.3SG today
   ‘The destruction of the columns happens today.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>*REFNO-REFNOM</th>
<th>AGRPRNCFN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. [FF[FN1 la destrucción] [FN2 de las columnas]], ocurre[n [FV h, h, ayer]]</td>
<td></td>
<td>*!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. [FF[FN1 la destrucción] [FN2 de las columnas]], ocurre[n [FV h, h, ayer]]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same negative evaluation of candidate a. in (26) occurs with a candidate such as (18a), *la mitad de los habitantes de Ámsterdam están compuestos de turcos, chinos y marroquíes* ‘a half of the inhabitants of Amsterdam are made up of Turks, Chinese and Moroccans’, given that in this context we propose that the partitive noun *mitad* ‘half’ does have the R-feature in the input and so may have referential interpretation; as such a candidate which violates AGRPRNCFN is less optimal than one which violates neither *REFNO-REFNOM* nor AGRPRNCFN.

As we have seen so far, sentences in which verbal agreement is made with the N2 and not with the N1 of an argument made up of a complex noun phrase are explained by the hierarchy of a pair of restrictions, AGRPRNCFN and *REFNO-REFNOM*. The former favours a structural fact while *REFNO-REFNOM* avoids semantic non-agreement to the detriment of the well-formed structure required by AGRPRNCFN. The conflict between these two restrictions is resolved with the hierarchy illustrated in (27):

(27) *REFNO-REFNOM > AGRPRNCFN

4. Conclusions

As has been seen in this analysis, verbal agreement in Spanish can show anomalies in its behaviour worthy of study since they are a symptom of other priorities of the language. In the case studied here, verbal agreement does not exhibit its usual behaviour (correspondence with the grammatical features of the head of the NP1 of a complex argument) given that it focuses on the need to mark an important reference under the special structural and semantic conditions which this analysis has shown to be related thanks to Optimality Theory system of formalizing and explaining linguistic phenomena.
References


Ana Aguilar Guevara
A.AguilarGuevara@students.uu.nl