Agreement alternations and Defective Probes in Dutch

Introduction – Standard Dutch and many Dutch dialects have position-dependent agreement (PDA) for 2P.SG. This paper argues for a novel syntactic analysis of PDA, making use of the concept of Defective Probes. I show that the account based on Defective Probes provides a simple and empirically adequate solution to PDA, forcing the conclusion that T and C are independent Probes (Haegeman & Van Koppen 2012, contra Chomsky 2008).

Data – The core phenomenon that this paper accounts for is illustrated in (1 & 2): 2P.SG agreement varies with word order (SV-VS). In SV, the verbal inflection is homophonous with 3P.SG; in VS, the inflection is homophonous with 1P.SG. Looking at 578 dialects (MAND corpus), we find this type of PDA only in varieties where 2P.SG inflection is non-unique ($n = 239$); varieties with unique 2P.SG inflection never exhibit PDA ($n = 130$).

(1) Jij loop-t   cf.   hij loop-t
     you walk-t   he walk-t
(2) Loop jij   cf.   ik loop
     walk-∅ you   I walk-∅

Prerequisites – I assume the (standard) inventory of binary features (e.g. Noyer 1992) in (3), and that they are organized in a geometry (4) (Harley & Ritter 2002; Preminger 2014) where each feature has a default value (underlined in (3)). Unvalued variants of these features are present on Probes (T and C; Carstens 2003, Van Koppen 2005) and valued variants are present on Goals (subjects). I assume with standard DM (Halle & Marantz 1993) that affixes are inserted at Morphology obeying the elsewhere principle.

(3)

		- Group	**+ Group**
+ Participant	**+ Author**	1P.SG	1P.PL
	- Author	2P.SG	2P.PL
- Participant		3P.SG	3P.PL

(4)

φ
[Participant] [Group]
  |
[Author]

I propose that Probes can be Defective (5) (cf. Chomsky 2000) and the morphological recovery principle in (6).

(5) **Defective Probe**: A Probe is Defective when it lacks a *u*[feature] that is *relevant* (i.e. being referred to) in the affix inventory. Defectivity is restricted by the person geometry.

(6) **Principle of Default Morphological Interpretation**: In the absence of a relevant feature, interpret the default value of that feature at Morphology.

Analysis – I follow Zwart's (1997) analysis of Dutch main clauses: the verb is in T in SV word order (normal declaratives), but in C in VS word order (inversion: questions, topicalizations, imperatives); the subject is always in SpecTP. I argue that in varieties with PDA, C, but not T, is a Defective Probe, and that it lacks *u*[Author] (7).

(7)

Given the data in (1 & 2), we have the following affix inventory (incl. the plural affix for completeness).

[+ Participant] [+ Author] [- Group] ⇔ ∅
([+ Group]   ⇔ -en)
Elsewhere   ⇔ -t

When C agrees with a 2P.SG subject ([+ Participant], [- Author], [- Group]), its feature will be valued as [+ Participant] and [- Group]. Given the affix inventory, [± Author] is relevant in the paradigm: by the Principle of Default Morphological Interpretation, [+ Author] will be interpreted at Morphology. As a result, Morphology sees [+ Participant], [+ Author], [- Group] and the 1P.SG affix will be inserted, correctly accounting for PDA with 2P.SG. 3P agreement is unaffected because regardless of the specification at Morphology, there is no affix that corresponds to the specification, so the elsewhere affix will be inserted.

CP
 …   CP
      C   TP
  u [Participant]   subject   TP
  u [Group]   T   …
                          u [Participant]
                          u [Author]
                          u [Group]

This proposal predicts that in varieties with a Defective Probe as in (7), also other types of C agreement will be homophonous for 1P and 2P, but T agreement not necessarily. This prediction is
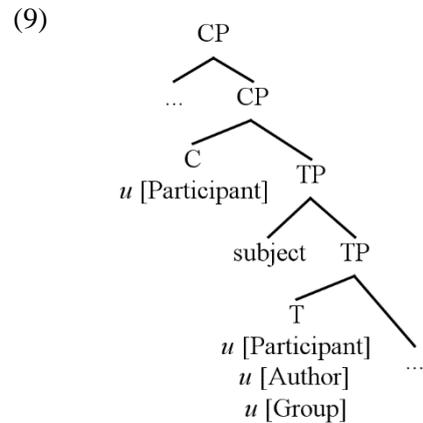
born out: we find PDA also for 2P.PL as well as 1P/2P homophonous complementizer agreement, providing further support for the proposal.

Even more Defective Probes – In addition to PDA with 2P.SG, several varieties of Dutch have an even more impoverished verbal paradigm and PDA with 2P.SG, 1P.PL and 2P.PL; in VS, the inflection is homophonous to 1P.SG. A full paradigm is given in (8).

(8)

	SV	VS
1P.SG	∅	∅
2P.SG	-t	∅
3P.SG	-t	-t
1P.PL	-t	∅
2P.PL	-t	∅
3P.PL	-t	-t

Affix inventory:

[+ Participant] [+ Author] [- Group]	⇔	∅
Elsewhere	⇔	-t

(9)

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            CP
           /  \
         ...    CP
              /    \
            C        TP
      u [Participant]  /  \
                  subject  TP
                         /  \
                        T    ...
                 u [Participant]
                 u [Author]
                 u [Group]
```

The current proposal provides a straightforward analysis: C is an even more Defective Probe and only bears *u*[Participant] (9). When there is agreement in C, the defaults for [Author] and [Group] will be interpreted at Morphology: [+ Author] and [- Group]. When C agrees with a [+ Participant] (1P.SG, 2P.SG, 1P.PL or 2P.PL), this will result in a 1P.SG interpretation at Morphology. Hence, the ∅ affix is inserted, leading to PDA for 2P.SG, 1P.PL, and 2P.PL.

Discussion – The proposed account of PDA as a result of Defective Probes is attractive from a learnability perspective, as it makes concrete the idea that the child only posits features that it has morphological evidence for. Since Defectivity of Probes is restricted by the person geometry, the current proposal makes strong empirical predictions, in contrast to alternative, morphophonology-based accounts. For instance, 3P should never exhibit PDA, since even in the absence of [Participant], the defining feature of 3P, [- Participant], will be interpreted at Morphology, as it is the default value. This prediction is correct: PDA with 3P is completely absent in the Dutch language area (Don, Fenger & Koeneman 2013). In addition, the current observation that PDA is only attested when the 2P.SG affix is syncretic refutes Ackema & Neeleman's (2003) morphophonological account, that requires PDA to make reference to a unique specification of the 2P.SG affix: in all and exactly those dialects that have a morphologically unique 2P.SG affix, PDA does *not* occur; whereas in exactly those dialects where the 2P.SG affix is not unique, PDA *does* occur.

Implications and conclusion – This paper argues that position-dependent agreement in Dutch is syntactic and the result of Defective Probes. The consequence is that T cannot inherit its features from C, but that they are dissociated (Haegeman & Van Koppen 2012): both T and C can bear unvalued phi-features and enter into Agree independently. In addition, Chomsky (2000) argues that Defective Probes fail to assign case to the Goal. The current paper provides the other side of the coin and shows the effect of Defective Probes on the Probe itself. In conclusion, the detailed study of microvariation in agreement is highly informative to the bigger picture questions of the distribution of features in syntax.

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