Phrasal or clausal conjunction? – postverbal conjoined subjects in Bosnian/ Croatian/ Serbian: an experimental study

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In some previous experimental work on agreement strategies in South Slavic languages (see Marušič et al. (20015), Willer-Gold et al. (2016), Čordalija et al. (2016)), it was demonstrated that the closest conjunct agreement (CCA) is the only available strategy for agreement with conjoined NPs in postverbal contexts. However, the examples that are claimed to be a result of closest conjunct agreement in postverbal contexts, as in (1a) from Bosnian/ Croatian/ Serbian (B/C/S), could potentially be analysed as clausal ellipsis, as in (1b)

(1) a. U borbi   su se sudarala koplja   i   sablje.
        in battle   collided.$_{neut}$ spears.$_{neut}$ and   swords.$_{fem}$
        'In the battle collided spears and swords.'
    b. U borbi su se sudarala koplja i ~~u borbi su se sudarale~~ sablje.

The clausal ellipsis analysis of examples with postverbal conjoined subjects was actually argued for by Aoun, Benmamoun and Sportiche (1994). In their approach based on examples from three dialects of Arabic, the postverbal linear agreement was actually claimed to be a result of clausal ellipsis, not of closest conjunct agreement. Thus, they predicted a semantic independence of two coordinated events. However, Munn (1999) pointed out that this claim is difficult to defend if a specific type of predicates were taken into account – the so-called collective predicates. Therefore, we designed a sentence-picture matching experiment with collective verbs and postverbal subjects with speakers of B/C/S in order to test whether postverbal linear agreement was a result of phrasal coordination or clausal ellipsis. The participants in the experiment were given sentences with accompanying pictures and they had to determine whether each sentence matched the corresponding picture and to what degree (on a 0-100% scale). Thirty participants were tested, third-year students at the University of Sarajevo (mean age 21). A 2x2 factorial design was employed, with collective predicates (*collide*-type verbs) and simple, non-collective predicates (*display*-type verbs), eight of each, contrasting conjoined &P subjects (e.g. *spears* and *swords*) with simple NPs (e.g. *swords*), yielding 32 experimental items and 32 fillers.

The study managed to show that CCA is not a result of clausal ellipsis, but a distinct agreement strategy. Since the experiment demonstrated no significant difference in ratings between sentences containing conjoined &P subjects and simple NP subjects with collective verbs, we concluded that sentences with conjoined &P subjects and collective predicates (*collide*-type verbs) were not derived by means of clausal ellipsis. Otherwise, such sentences would be rated considerably lower than all others, because the picture with which such sentences were paired would be incompatible with the interpretation which assumes two-event semantics. And such readings would be inevitable if such sentences underlyingly had a biclausal structure.

References

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