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The effects of syntactic and semantic feature competition in gender agreement

In this talk I address the issue of formal and semantic feature competition in the context of mixed agreement in Russian. The phenomenon of mixed agreement occurs when a single controller triggers different agreement values on its targets. In Russian, a three-gender language, there is a set of nouns that denote professional status of humans and by default trigger masculine grammatical agreement. When referring to a female human they may trigger both masculine and feminine agreement and constituents may show different gender values for the same controller.

In my study I evaluate the range of the variance of mixed agreement patterns in Russian and test the existing approaches to their analysis against experimental data. By means of production and acceptability judgement experiments I show that agreement patterns are not equally available to the speaker. In particular, patterns within which attributives show feminine agreement are mostly restricted. Although researchers were focusing primarily on them when modelling mixed agreement, these patterns demonstrated low frequency in production experiment (around 7%) and low acceptability score (mean value 2,5). The obtained empirical evidence leads to the hypothesis that feminine attributive agreement arises as the effect of formal and semantic feature competition during the process of speech production. Thus, Russian data might provide considerable insight into question of how syntactic mechanisms that govern agreement interact with conflicting semantic information.