(Null) pronouns and (null) agreement

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1   Pronouns often behave differently from full noun phrases — and typically, when differences between pronouns and full noun phrases show up, the pronoun 'does its work' overtly while the full noun phrase procrastinates. This may be manifest in word order (e.g. in the English verb–particle construction: *John looked up the information/*it*, *John looked the information/it up*); it also comes to the fore in the domain of agreement phenomena. Thus, in Kilega (Bantu; Kinyalolo 1991), *wh*-phrases agree in φ-features with the finite verb, overruling the privileged relation between the subject and the finite verb, *except* when the subject is a (null) pronoun, in which case *wh*-agreement and subject agreement co-occur. Similarly, in dialects of American English spoken in the Northeast of the United States (Kimball & Aissen 1971, Kayne 1989), φ-feature agreement on the finite verb can be triggered by the *wh*-phrase (cf. (1b)), overruling subject–verb agreement; but as in Bantu, (weak) pronouns must trigger agreement on the finite verb (1′).

(1)   a.   the people who *Clark thinks* are in the garden
         b.   ᵎthe people **who** Clark **think** are in the garden
(1′)   a.   the people who *he thinks* are in the garden
         b.   *the people **who** he **think** are in the garden

Independently of the strength of the φ-features in I, weak and null pronouns must check I's φ-features against their own in overt syntax — arguably as a consequence of the fact that a weak/null pronoun lacks all features that would make it visible to the LF computation. In this regard, weak/null pronouns are like *expletives* (cf. Roberts & Shlonsky 1996), which likewise must raise in overt syntax (cf. Bošković 1997: *I alleged {him/there/*John} to ...*). Weak pronouns and expletives, though PF–overt, are LF–invisible.

2   English [+plural] verb inflection and [–plural] noun inflection are null, their converses being marked in with the aid of a morphological marker that systematically has the same allophonic variation in the two contexts: *-s*. Strang (1966) has suggested that this may lie at the root of agreement 'attraction' phenomena (cf. (2b)): the plural agreement form is used to avoid repetition of *-s*. This makes the strong predilection for 'attraction' to plural understandable, but it has little to say about cases of agreement not involving *-s* plurals (*the identity of the children is/*ᵎare* ...*). We propose an analysis of 'attraction' in terms of LF feature movement: the features of the lower noun raise and adjoin to the D–head of the containing noun phrase, triggering verb agreement as a result. The prediction of this LF movement approach, in the light of section 1's conclusion that pronouns are LF–invisible hence cannot LF–move, is that pronouns should be unable to trigger agreement 'attraction'. This is correct for *overt* pronouns (cf. (3)); Kayne 1998), and also for *null* pronouns, occurring in at least two contexts in English, as discussed in section 3.

(2)   a.   the *identity* of the participants *is* to remain a secret
         b.   ᵎthe identity of the **participants are** to remain a secret
(3)   a.   {their *identity*/the *identity* of them} *is* to remain a secret
         b.   *{**their** identity/the identity of **them**} **are** to remain a secret

3   The noun phrase *the poor* in (4a) can be analyzed as in (4b) or (4b′) (cf. e.g. Kester 1996). An important observation which allows us to decide between these two options is that, despite the formal plurality of *the poor*, it cannot trigger agreement attraction. The ungrammaticality of (5b) can be related to that of (2) if we assume an analysis of *the poor* in terms of a *pronominally headed* structure (cf. (4b′)).

(4)　　a.　　　the poor are suffering the most

　　　　b.　　　[$_{DP}$ *the* [$_{A/NP}$ [$_A$ *poor*]]]　　　　　　　　　b′.　　[$_{DP}$ *the* [$_{AP}$ *poor* [$_{NP}$ *pro*$_{[+PLUR]}$]]]

(5)　　a.　　　the *identity* of the poor *is* to remain a secret

　　　　b.　　　*the identity of the **poor are** to remain a secret

The poor's failure to trigger agreement attraction, analyzed in terms of the LF–movement approach motivated in section 2, thus confirms that null pronouns are like weak pronouns in their LF invisibility. Further confirmation comes from the behavior of collective noun phrases. British English (and to a limited degree American English as well) allows collective noun phrases headed by a formally singular noun to trigger plural agreement with the finite verb, as in (6b). Yet, despite their outward plurality, 'pluringulars' cannot trigger agreement attraction — (7b) is ungrammatical. The ungrammaticality of (7b) can once again be related to that of (2) (and (5b)) if we assume an analysis of 'pluringulars' in terms of a *pronominally headed* structure, as in (8) (which will be identified as an apposition structure). For both *the poor* and 'pluringulars' a *pro*-based analysis has several additional virtues, one of which is highlighted in section 4.

(6)　　a.　　　the committee *has* decided

　　　　b.　　ᵗthe committee **have** decided　　　　　　　　　　　['pluringular']

(7)　　a.　　　the diverse *background*/education *level* of the committee *is* to remain a secret

　　　　b.　　　*the diverse background/education level of the **committee are** to remain a secret

(8)　　　　　　[$_{DP1}$ *pro*$_{[+PLUR]}$ [$_{DP2}$ *the committee*$_{[-PLUR]}$]]

4　　　Agreement in *there* existentials is more flexible than a simple-minded 'expletive replacement' (Chomsky 1986, 1995) analysis can explain. Yet, while flexible in (9), agreement in *there* sentences is entirely *in*flexible in sentences in which the associate of *there* is a 'pluringular' (10b); cf. Elbourne (1999).

(9)　　a.　　　there *are* lots of people in the room

　　　　b.　　　there*'s* lots of people in the room

(10)　　a.　　　there*'s*/*is* a committee (holding a meeting) in the room

　　　　b.　　　*there *are* a committee (holding a meeting) in the room

Contra Chomsky (1995:384, n. 42), singular agreement in *there*-sentences with plural associates represents a real option of the grammar (cf. Schütze 1999). To make it follow, what we need is an analysis of *there* sentences in which in sentences of the type in (9) *there* has 'a choice of associate' — a plural one alongside a singular one. Finding a potential plural associate is not difficult; the question is what *there*'s singular associate in (9b) might be. A small clause analysis of locatives provides the answer. The structure in (11) translates the oscillation between plural and singular finite verb agreement in (9) as a reflex of the fact that *there* in (11) can pick either of two constituents as its associate: NP (→plural) or SC (→singular agreement).

(11)　　　　　　*there ...* [$_{SC}$ [$_{NP}$ *lots of people*] [$_{PP}$ *in the room*]]

Ruling out (10b) is now straightforward. 'Pluringular' *committee* cannot be the associate of *there* because it has the pronominally headed structure in (8) — this immediately disqualifies it as a potential associate of *there*, for the same reason that pronouns in general cannot be the associate of *there*, an instantiation of the definiteness restriction on *there* existentials. With NP in (11) a 'pluringular', then, only SC can be the associate of *there*, and singular verb agreement is the only option. The ease with which *pro*-based (8) links up (10b) to the other properties of 'pluringulars' (including (7b)) makes it strongly superior to Elbourne's (1999) analysis of (10b), which is heavily dependent on Chomsky's (1986, 1995) 'expletive replacement' approach to *there* sentences — an analysis which, in a final section, we will show is empirically inadequate.