A Trommer-first account of Georgian agreement

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Georgian agreement presents two analytic challenges: competition and discontinuity. In launching Distributed Morphology, Halle and Marantz 1993 presented a purely morphological account of these. Though fit for their purposes (increased descriptive adequacy over predecessor work), the account was not particularly constrained. Competition mechanisms could equally easily yield the opposite outcome and discontinuities could be reversed. Béjar 2003 turned to syntax (specifically, where the search for argumental person was headquartered) to cull some of this excess. Two problems remained, however. Number was not wholly amenable to similar treatment: sometimes it behaved like a dependant of person, sometimes not. And, just as on Halle and Marantz’ approach, discontinuities—in particular, the person-number precedence—remained reversible. I propose to start at the opposite horn of the Georgian dilemma end but to head in the same direction. I will provide a syntax-driven account of discontinuous agreement (a move spearheaded by Trommer 2002) and then derive the results of agreement competition with minimal but nonzero stipulation. The account is an application of my previous work on discontinuous agreement in Afroasiatic, Ngumbin, and Sepik (Harbour 2023, building on Harbour 2008, 2016). The driving claims are (i) that number dominates person in the syntax; (ii) that such dominance maps to postcedence during exponence, [number [person]] maps to person-...-number; and (iii) that only string edges are available to linearisation (leaving aside morphological special ops, like metathesis). If the phi-structure is linearised after the verb, a string of suffixes results, ...-person-number. If it precedes the verb, it yields a discontinuity, person-...-number. Bottom-to-top exponence (Bobaljik 2000) allows object agreement to affix nearer to the verb than subject agreement. This resolves competition save for two hangovers. Without further constraint, my account allows for multiple prefixes in one case and multiple suffixes in quite a few. To avoid multiple suffixes, I appeal to properties of Georgian morphophonology: although Georgian is famous for consonant clusters, these are positionally restricted. To avoid the one case of multiple prefixes, I posit that first person has a zero allomorph. This, again, has motivation: other person and person-like prefixes also have zero allomorphs. Neatly, the factor that drives prefixal placement of phi-structures yields precisely the conditioning environment needed for zero realisation of first person. So, the innovation is minimal. Time permitting, I will discuss the apparent turf squabble between my account and Béjar’s. Although both vie to explain Georgian, I doubt that they are in competition everywhere. In particular, Migrelian, a western relative of Georgian, lacks what I regard as the key diagnostic for a learner to opt for my mechanisms. At the same time, it presents a phenomenon that looks much more probe-like and is missing from Georgian. In other words, both accounts have explanatory mileage and further work is needed to characterise the proper application of each.