What corpus studies can reveal about Multiple Antecedent Agreement in Latin

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Corpus studies have greatly informed our understanding of grammar in the history of linguistics. Even in the Classics, a field with a more or less finite data set, the continued use of corpora as a means of investigation has nonetheless shed light on several structural curiosities. One area that has benefited from a corpus study is that of multiple antecedent agreement in Latin, where more than one noun controls agreement on a single or multiple targets. While such structures are relatively infrequent in Latin, they allow us to investigate how agreement is accomplished in more difficult contexts. Unlike single antecedent agreement, which involves, in most cases, the target simply assuming the same features as the controller, multiple antecedent agreement produces an agreement mismatch: the target's features will never match those of at least one of the controllers, since only one set of feature values can be expressed at a time.

Most of the standard Latin grammar handbooks have some explanation as to how agreement proceeds in multiple antecedent contexts. However, the statements do not quite match across handbooks. For example, all the handbooks indicate that two strategies exist for multiple antecedent agreement: Resolution (where the features of the controllers are "computed" to produce a resolved gender and plural number on the target, (1)) and Nearest Antecedent Agreement (where the target assumes only the features of the closer controller, (2)).

(1)   formosi   sunt verris   et   scrofa
            handsome.**M.PL**. are boar.M.SG. and sow.F.SG.
            'The boar and the sow are handsome.' (Varro, *RR II.4.4*)

(2)   filia   atque **unus**   e   filiis **captus est**
            daughter.F.SG. and   one.**M.SG**. from sons was-captured.**M.SG**.
            'the daughter and one of the sons were captured.' (Caesar, *BG 1.26*)

However, the grammars do not agree on the exact application and distribution of these two strategies. Additionally, while all of the handbooks discuss Resolution rules at length, not all of them give the same amount of detail to Nearest Antecedent Agreement, if they even mention it at all, implying that this strategy is perhaps more unusual or marked than Resolution. There are also instances where grammar handbooks will provide examples for one strategy that are actually ambiguous between Resolution and Nearest Antecedent Agreement (e.g. (3) from Allen & Greenough).

(3)   uxor   deinde   ac   liberi   amplexi
           wife.F.SG. then   and children.M.PL. embraced.M.PL.
           'Then his wife and children embraced [him].'

In the above example, the participle *amplexi* can be masculine plural as a result of Resolution (as animate controllers assign masculine resolved gender) or as a result of Nearest Antecedent Agreement (since *liberi* is also masculine plural). These issues and others like them suggest that even a relatively well-addressed topic still warrants an empirical study.

To this end, I conducted a 300,000-word corpus study in Latin, including texts from Old Latin (e.g. Cato, Varro, Plautus) through Silver Age Latin (e.g. Suetonius), in order to provide a more complete and consistent analysis of multiple antecedent agreement in Latin. The results of this corpus study suggest that Nearest Antecedent Agreement is just as likely to occur as Resolution and, in some contexts, is even the preferred strategy. Additionally, this corpus study allows us to make larger typological generalizations about multiple antecedent agreement by comparing the results with empirical studies in other languages. Existing cross-linguistic research has shown that multiple antecedent agreement follows the patterns of the Agreement Hierarchy (4) and the Predicate Hierarchy (5).

(4)   The Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett 1979, 2006)
        attributive | predicate | relative pronoun | personal pronoun
        ← syntactic agreement   semantic agreement →
        Nearest Antecedent Agreement   Resolution

(5)   The Predicate Hierarchy (Comrie 1975)
            verb | participle | adjective | noun
        ← syntactic agreement   semantic agreement →
        Nearest Antecedent Agreement   Resolution

The data from Latin supports these typological generalizations, which in turn raises the question of *why* such patterns occur in Latin. The analysis I suggest, on the basis of qualitative data collected from my corpus study, is a view that takes into consideration linguistic performance, such that the distribution can be explained according to broader principles within and across languages (in particular, gender assignment and Avoidance (Hock 2007)).

The results of this corpus study show that while the claims in the grammar handbooks are often taken as standard and uncontroversial, empirical evidence should be used to support those claims, especially when disagreement is found across multiple handbooks. Corpus studies can also add to research on broader typological patterns on a grander scale, allowing us to situate data from Latin (and other ancient languages) with recent work in more modern languages.

References

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