The Unmarkedness of Subject-Verb Agreement in Contemporary English

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Abstract

Subject-verb agreement in contemporary English has always been regarded as an operation morphologically marked, especially through the bound morpheme -s on the verb/auxiliary.3SG[1] in the present tense. However, that agreement is not marked neither on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the past tense nor on modal auxiliaries. It is worth noting that this is surprising for a language where subject-verb agreement is viewed as morphologically visible. Things are supposed to be so due to the poverty of the English inflectional morphology (Cf. Roberts, 1985; Pollock, 1989; Chomsky, 1991; 1993; Fernández-Pena, 2014; 2017; inter alia). *Thus, since subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is said to be visible only through the occurrence of the bound morpheme -s on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present tense, this morpheme is consequently taken as the symbol of subject-verb agreement markedness (Cf. Kayne, 1989; 1994). And yet, when considering some non-assertive constructions and sentences having a collective noun as grammatical subject, there are reasons to postulate that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not morphologically marked. This paper is then intended to show that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not morphologically marked, that the bound morpheme realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present tense appears to be the realization of a pragmatic/discursive feature, and that this morphemic realization is triggered by legibility conditions as proposed by the Strong Minimalist Thesis* (Chomsky, 1995).

Keywords: *Subject-verb agreement, feature [3SG], topic feature, Strong Minimalist Thesis, morpheme -s, referential defectivity.*

1. Introduction

In natural languages where subject-verb agreement is obviously visible through the morphological structure of the verbal element, it is observed that each

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[1] First person singular/plural (1SG/PL), Second person singular/plural (2SG/PL), Third person singular/plural (3SG/PL).

person (i.e. 1SG/PL, 2SG/PL, 3SG/PL) shows a distinctive ending on the verb or auxiliary. This is the case, for instance, of languages like French or Spanish.[2] This is also the reason why such languages are said to be morphologically rich.

As for English, it is considered as a language with poor (inflectional) morphology in the sense that distinctive endings or inflectional morphemes on the finite verb/auxiliary are non-existent for the different persons. Rather, only on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present tense do we have the bound morpheme -*s*. By way of consequence, the bound morpheme -*s* is viewed as an evidence to assume that subject-verb agreement is morphologically marked on the verb/auxiliary in contemporary English. Nevertheless, there are (empirical) reasons to assume that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not morphologically marked.

Thus, this paper is intended to show that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not morphologically marked, that the bound morpheme occurring on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present tense appears to be the realization of a pragmatic/discursive feature, and that this morphemic realization is triggered by legibility conditions as proposed by the Strong Minimalist Thesis (Chomsky, 1995).

The theoretical framework of this paper is the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), within the perspective of the Cartography of Syntactic Structures (Rizzi 1997). The data used in this paper were collected from different written texts from authors like Reid (1991), Biber *et al.* (1999), Radford (2009), Haskell and MacDonald (2003), Harley and Ritter (2002), Dowty and Jacobson (1988), Corbett (2006), den Dikken (2001), Eberhard (1999), Acuña-Fariña (2009), among others.

The paper is divided into three main parts, namely section 2 dealing with the morphological invisibility of subject-verb agreement in contemporary English, section 3 related to the nature of the bound morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliairy.3SG in the present tense, and section 4 which is about the occurrence of the bound morpheme -*s* on the verb/auxiliairy.3SG as a consequence of the Strong Minimalist Thesis.

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[2] In French, for example, a verbal base form ending in -*er* such as *aller* (go) has the following endings in the simple past: *j'allai* (1SG), *tu allas* (2SG), *il/elle alla* (3SG), *nous allâmes* (1PL), *vous allâtes* (2PL), *ils/elles allèrent* (3PL). Likewise, in Spanish, for verbs with a base form ending in -*ar*, such as *cantar* (sing), the different endings on the verb in the present tense are as follows: *canto* (1SG), *cantas* (2SG), *canta* (3SG), *cantamos* (1PL), *cantáis* (2PL), *cantan* (3PL).

2. The morphological invisibility of subject-verb agreement in contemporary English

The idea that subject-verb agreement is (morphologically) unmarked in contemporary English proves to be on the right track when considering the utterances of the type of those in (1), (2), (3) and (4).

(1)

    a.   Cherry cokes is   the most popular drink here. (Reid, 1991, p. 194)
        NP.3PL   Cop.Pres.3PL

    b.   Five miles   is   a long distance to walk. (Biber *et al.*, 1999:187)
        DP.3PL   Cop.Pres.3PL

    c.   The faculty are   all agreed on this point.
        DP.3SG   Cop.Pres.3SG

    d.   [This bomber and its cargo] probably weighs over a hundred tons. (Biber *et al.*, 1999, p. 180)
        [&P.3PL]   Pres.3PL

    e.   Two drops   deodorizes/*deodorize   anything in your house. (Reid, 1991, p. 331)
        DP.3PL   Pres.3PL

(2)

    a.   I suggest that   he   work/*work**s**   part-time.
             Comp   3SG.Nom

    b.   They recommended that   she   pay/*pay**s**   cash.
                 Comp   3SG.Nom

(3)

    a.   The wind   destroyed all the crops.
        DP.3SG   Past.3SG

    b.   *The wind   destroyed**s** all the crops.
        DP.3SG   Past.3SG

    (4)

    a.   The neighbor must   visit the doctor tomorrow.
        DP.3SG   Mod.3SG

    b.   *The neighbor   must**s**   visit the doctor tomorrow.
        DP.3SG   Mod.3SG

In (1), the observation of the utterances reveals that the so-called marker of subject-verb agreement (3SG), i.e. the bound morpheme -*s* realized on the verbal element, is not always associated with a grammatical subject bearing the morphological feature [3SG]. Indeed, the grammatical subjects *cherry cokes* and *five miles* in (1a) and (1b), respectively, agreeing with the copula realized *is*, have

the formal feature [3PL]. This observation clearly disapproves the assumption that the copula *is* always agrees with a nominative subject defined by the feature [3SG]. Correlatively, the subject *the faculty* in (1c), which is defined by the formal feature [3SG], agrees with the copular verb *are*. Here, again, the copula is not realized *is*, even though the subject has the feature [3SG]. Moreover, the coordination phrase (&P) *this bomber and its cargo* representing the grammatical subject in (1d), having obviously the feature [3PL], agrees with the verb *weighs* bearing the bound morpheme -*s*, the alleged marker of the subject-verb agreement implying the feature [3SG]. On the other hand, there is the subject *two drops* in (1e) with the feature [3PL] which agrees with the verb *deodorizes*. There is an asymmetry between the morphological feature [3PL] of the subject *two drops* and the ending on the verb *deodorizes*, if subject-verb agreement is taken to be (morphologically) marked on the verbal element. More surprisingly, there is an ungrammaticality when the relevant verb is realized *deodorize*, i.e. without the bound morpheme -*s*. In this respect, needless to say that the bound morpheme -*s* on the verb *deodorizes* cannot be the marker of the agreement.3SG with the subject *two drops* (3PL).

In (2), it is observable that subject-verb agreement is not marked on the verb in the embedded clause headed by the finite complementizer *that*. As a reminder, contemporary English has three complementizers: *that*, *if* (finite complementizers) and *for* (non-finite complementizer) (Cf. Rizzi, 1997). In the embedded CP of the utterance *I suggest that he work part-time* (2a), the verb *work* seems to be in its base form even if it is associated with the nominative pronominal subject *he*. Likewise, in (2b), in the embedded *that*-clause, the nominative subject *she* is associated with the base form of the verb *pay*. In fact, the verbs *work* and *pay* in (2a) and (2b), respectively, are base forms due to the ungrammaticality of the strings **I suggest that he works part-time* and **they recommended that she pays cash*. Since the sentences in (2a) and (2b), where there is no desinence on the verb, are grammatical, then, it can be asserted that subject-verb agreement is not visible.

Regarding the example in (3), it is worth noting that the ungrammaticality of the sequence in (3b) is problematic as regards the possibility for subject-verb agreement to be marked in contemporary English. As a matter of fact, when subject-verb agreement is marked in a natural language, it is marked in all tenses found in that language (Cf. languages like German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, etc.). English having two tenses (present and past), it is very surprising to observe that the so-called or alleged "symbol" of the markedness of subject-verb

agreement in English, i.e. the bound morpheme -*s* on the verb.3SG in present sentences, is not licensed on the verb.3SG in past sentences like the one in (3b).

In (4), when the modal auxiliary *must* takes the alleged marker of subject-verb agreement (i.e. the bound morpheme -*s*), the resulting sentence is ungrammatical. It is well known that when subject-verb agreement is morphologically marked in a natural language, it is marked either on the main verb when there is no auxiliary or on the auxiliary when there is one in the sentence. However, in (4), when the morpheme -*s*, allegedly said to mark subject-verb agreement in contemporary English, is realized on the modal auxiliary *must* agreeing with the subject.3SG *the neighbor*, ungrammaticality follows. What this means is that the concerned morpheme is not a marker of subject-verb agreement in contemporary English as commonly assumed; it is likely that that agreement is not morphologically marked.

3. The nature of the bound morpheme -s on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present

If the bound morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present is not a marker of subject-verb agreement in contemporary English, then, it proves logical to wonder about the nature of that morpheme. In fact, there are reasons to suspect that (i) the bound morpheme -*s* is a realization of a pragmatic feature in view of the discursive status of nominative grammatical subjects, and that (ii) the relevant morpheme is an allomorph of the so-called genitive morpheme –*'s* due to the syntactic, morphophonological and semantic similarities existing between the two morphemes.

3.1. THE MORPHEME -S AS A REALIZATION OF A TOPIC FEATURE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

The bound morpheme -*s* on the verbal element in the present can be regarded as a realization of a discursive feature, in this case, a topic feature. Indeed, grammatical subjects are said to share many properties with topicalized elements, i.e. they are said to have much in common with topics (Reinhart, 1981; Laenzlinger, 2006; Frascarelli, 2007). For instance, Frascarelli (2007, p. 26) stipulates that "topics and subjects share basic properties since they are both connected with given information and provide a starting point for the event described in the predication." In addition to that, Chomsky (2000, p. 93) admits that "one option of variation among languages has to do with left-right orientation, English being syntactically «left-headed» […] and Japanese «right-headed»." Thus, if sentences in contemporary English are oriented to the left, it means that they are oriented towards their grammatical subject, given the fact that the

grammatical subject represents the topic or target of the sentence. In other words, a sentence can be defined as a set of information about the grammatical subject.

These observations suggest that grammatical subjects, at least in contemporary English, are to be considered as topics[3] in finite sentences. As a matter of fact, I postulate that grammatical subjects of finite sentences in contemporary English have a topic feature ([+topic]) which is linked to their nominative Case.

Since the feature [+topic] of nominative subjects in contemporary English is a discursive feature (or interface feature), the head top is likely to be found in the CP domain. This implies that, during the derivation of finite sentences, nominative subjects move higher than [Spec. TP][4] to join [Spec. topP] that I assume to be located immediately above FinP. Therefore, I propose the following hierarchy.
(5)

ForceP … (TopP) … (FocP) … **topP** … FinP … TP …

As regards the abovementioned facts, I consequently assume that the bound morpheme -*s* is a realization of the topic feature of the nominative subject on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in present sentences as a way of showing/marking the particular pragmatic status of nominative subjects. Concerning the reasons why the relevant morpheme is realized only on the verb/auxiliary defined by the formal feature [3SG], those reasons will be dealt with later in this paper (i.e. in the section 3).

It is worth mentioning that if the morpheme -*s* proves to be the marker of the topic status of nominative subjects, it is because that morpheme seems to be an allomorph of another marker of topic status in contemporary English, i.e. the genitive morpheme – '*s*.

3.2. THE MORPHEME -S: AN ALLOMORPH OF THE GENITIVE MORPHEME –'S

Regarding the bound morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present as an allomorph, a variant or another occurrence of the genitive morpheme – '*s* is quite logical when considering some similarities existing between the two morphemes. Those similarities between both morphemes are observable with respect to their syntactic position, their (morpho)phonological functioning, and their semantic scope.

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[3] A distinction should be made between Topics and topics (Cf. Laenzlinger, 2006). The first one (i.e. Topics) being the constituent merged into the initial position of the finite sentence, and the second one (i.e. topics) representing grammatical subjects with nominative Case.

[4] According to the approach, [Spec. TP] can be tantamount to [Spec. IP], [Spec. AspP], [Spec. SubjP], [Spec. MoodP], etc.

3.2.1. Syntactic position

The morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present and the genitive morpheme –*'s* do share syntactic (or structural) properties in contemporary English. Indeed, both morphemes are always located in a head position. In other words, each morpheme can be either a head or an element attached to an item which is a head, in the sense that a head can only be attached to another head in the structure (Rouveret, 2018, p. 32). In this respect, the examples in (6) can be considered.

(6)

   a. This child sing**s** very well.

[$_{topP}$ This child [$_{top'}$ top Fin [$_{TP}$ ~~This child~~ [$_{T'}$ T$_{PRES}$ [$_{VP}$ ~~This child~~ [$_{V'}$ [$_{V}$ sing**s**] [$_{AdvP}$ very well]]]]]]]

   b.Ryan**'s** messy room. (Cf. the messy room of Ryan)

   14. [$_{DP}$ [$_{NP}$ [$_{N'}$ [$_{N}$ Ryan]]] [$_{D'}$ [$_{D}$ **'s**] [$_{NP}$ messy room]]][5]

As can be seen in (6a), the morpheme -*s* is located in the position of the head V because it is attached to the verbal head *sings* filling that position. Correlatively, in (6b), the so-called genitive morpheme –*'s* lies in the position of the head D, but because of its being a bound morpheme needing a lexical support, it attaches to the head noun *Ryan* in the specifier of DP.

Regarding the examples from (6), it can be noted that the morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present and the genitive morpheme –*'s* occupy the same type of syntactic position, namely a head position.

3.2.2. Morphophonological properties

After the syntactic position, another similarity between the morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present and the genitive morpheme -*'s* lies in their (morpho)phonological functioning. As a matter of fact, when both morphemes have their lexical support involved in a pluralization operation giving rise to the plurality marker -*s*, they behave the same way in the sense that they mutate. Clearly, when the lexical support for those morphemes gets a feature [+plural], the morphemes are not realized (phonetically) or pronounced: they become null. In that perspective, the examples in (7) and (8) are very telling.

(7)

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[5] Even though *Ryan* is topicalized in *Ryan's messy room*, the phrase remains a DP because *Ryan* has a genitive Case. Then, *Ryan's messy room* cannot be a topP for the simple reason that the feature of the head top is linked to a nominative Case.

a. The street**'s**/*street'   width.

    DP.3SG

b. The streets**'**/*streets**'s**   width.

    DP.3PL

(8)

    a.   He   buy**s**/*buy   fewer cigarettes now.

        3SG   Pres.3SG

    b.   They   buy/*buy**s**   fewer cigarettes now.

        3PL   Pres.3PL

On the one hand, in (7), it is observed that the genitive morpheme is realized in (7a) because its lexical support, i.e. the item on which it is attached, the head noun *street*, is formally defined by the feature [-plural]. And yet, when the lexical support, *street*, obtains the feature [+plural] materialized by the plurality suffix *-s* in (7b), the genitive morpheme is not realized. On the other hand, a similar situation is observed in (8) as regards the behavior of the morpheme realized on the verb.3SG in the present. Indeed, the relevant morpheme is realized in (8a) on the verb *buys* (3SG) with a feature [-plural], however, it is not realized when the verb is defined by the feature [3PL], including a feature [+plural]: that is the case in (8b).

Therefore, it can be said that the two morphemes have much in common with respect to their morphophonology. Also, given the symmetry between the examples in (7) and (8), it can be assumed that both morphemes represent two occurrences of the same morpheme.

3.2.3. Semantic value

In addition to the fact that there are syntactic and (morpho)phonological similarities between the morpheme *-s* on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present and the genitive morpheme *-'s*, another similarity between both morphemes is a semantic one. In fact, the relevant morphemes can be called "topicalizers" since they signal the topic status of the constituent on their left. For instance, the grammatical subject *this child* in (6a) is a topic (Cf. the subsection 3.2.1.), and this is observable through the morpheme *-s* realized on the verb *sings*; likewise, the noun *Ryan* is topicalized in (6b) precisely because of the presence of the genitive morpheme *-'s*. In fact, *Ryan* is not topicalized in *the messy room of Ryan*, but it is in *Ryan's messy room*.

It is worth mentioning that both *this child* in (6a) and *Ryan* in (6b) have undergone a movement (or internal merge) to join the initial position due to their topic status.

By way of consequence, it can be assumed that the semantic scope of both morphemes comes to strengthen the idea postulating that they constitute allomorphs, i.e. two occurrences of the same morpheme.

Briefly, regarding section 2, it seems obvious that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not morphologically marked on the verbal element as assumed by syntacticians, in the sense that the so-called "symbol" of the markedness of that agreement, i.e. the bound morpheme -*s* on the verb/auxiliary in the present, is not a realization of the formal feature [3SG], but of a topic feature linked to the nominative case of grammatical subjects. As for section 3, it presents interesting facts strengthening the idea that the morpheme -*s* realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present in contemporary English, i.e. the alleged marker (and symbol) of subject-verb agreement, is not a marker of subject-verb agreement. In fact, that morpheme seems to be an allomorph or another occurrence of the genitive morpheme -*'s*.

But, if subject-verb agreement is not marked or visible in contemporary English and nominative subjects have the feature [+topic], then, what motivates the realization of the morpheme -*s* on the verb/auxiliary with the formal feature [3SG]? Why is it that the morpheme is realized in the present but neither in the past nor on modal auxiliaries? The section 4 strives to provide plausible answers to these questions.

4. The morpheme -s on the verb/auxiliairy.3SG and the Strong Minimalist Thesis

So far, it has been shown that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not (morphologically) marked, that the morpheme -*s* on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in the present does not represent the symbol of the markedness of that agreement, and that the relevant morpheme is a realization of a topic feature linked to the nominative Case of subjects. In fact, the morpheme -*s* on the verb/auxiliary.3SG is likely to be an allomorph of the genitive morpheme – *'s*.

In this section, it will be shown that the formal feature [3SG/PL] is referentially defective on grammatical subjects. This fact constituting a problem

(Cf. Full Interpretation Principle[6]), the system resorts to a resurgence of the genitive morpheme -*'s* on the verb/auxiliary.3SG as a way of trying and solving the problem related to the referential defectivity of subjects with the morphological feature [3SG/PL].

4.1. THE REFERENTIAL DEFECTIVITY OF THE FORMAL FEATURE [3SG/PL] IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

The morphological feature of third person ([3SG/PL]) is regarded as a feature with referential defectivity in that it gives rise to an instability or versatility of the reference denoted by the grammatical subject bearing it. Indeed, the grammatical subject defined by the feature [3SG] may have either an atomic reference or a plural reference, and the same is true when the subject is defined by [3PL]. This is why, Benveniste (1966) claimed that the third person feature is the feature of non-person. As a result, third person pronouns are considered underspecified with respect to the feature [Person], whereas first and second person pronouns are said to be fully specified for the same feature (Rouveret 2015, p. 359). This is quite understandable when we think of first and second persons as having the feature [+Participant] as regards discursive events, while third persons have a feature [-Participant] (Nevins, 2007, 2011).

To grasp the referential defectivity of the feature [3SG/PL] on grammatical subjects in contemporary English, let us reconsider the utterances in (1a), (1b) and (1c), repeated below in (9a), (9b) and (9c), respectively.

(9)

   a.   Cherry cokes   is   the most popular drink here. (Reid, 1991, p. 194)

        NP.3PL   Cop.Pres.3PL

   b.   Five miles   is   a long distance to walk. (Biber *et al.*, 1999, p. 187)

        DP.3PL   Cop.Pres.3PL

   c.   The faculty   are   all agreed on this point.
        DP.3SG   Cop.Pres.3SG

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[6] This principle stipulates that all elements included in LF/SEM and PHON, be it features or bundles of features, must be interpretable, i.e. they must be legible by the C-I and SM interfaces. (Rouveret, 2015, p. 192).

The grammatical subject *cherry cokes* in (9a) is defined by the feature [3PL]. From a logical point of view, the subject *cherry cokes* should refer to a set of entities taken to be distinct, i.e. it should have a plural reference. And yet, *cherry cokes* does have an atomic reference. Indeed, for the speaker, *cherry cokes* represents a drink; as such, it can only have an atomic reference despite its feature [3PL]. Likewise, in (9b), the subject *five miles* has the formal feature [3PL]. However, since *five miles* represents a distance, its reference is then atomic. Here, again, the feature [3PL] of *five miles* does not prevent it to have an atomic referential value.

Next, in (9c), needless to say that the grammatical subject *the faculty* has the morphological feature [3SG]; but, in no way does it refer to a single entity. As a matter of fact, the reference denoted by *the faculty* is not atomic. The presence of the quantifier *all* (referring to *the faculty*) is very telling in this respect. Clearly, it can be retained that the subject *the faculty* refers to each member of a set called "faculty"; in this view, the reference of the subject is plural, what does not go along with its feature [3SG].

From what precedes, it is easy to apprehend the basis for the idea that the feature [3SG/PL] is referentially defective in contemporary English.

4.2. THE (NON-)REALIZATION OF THE MORPHEME –S ON THE VERB/AUXILIARY.3SG

According to the Strong Minimalist Thesis, language is an optimal solution to legibility conditions imposed by systems external to the Language Faculty, i.e. the C-I and SM systems, respectively related to meaning and sound. In other words, language is supposed to find the best solution for any problem related to the interpretations of the meaning and sound of all linguistic expressions. Given the fact that the formal feature [3SG/PL] is a source of referential defectivity of the grammatical subject bearing it in contemporary English, the feature [+topic] of nominative subjects is realized as an allomorph of the genitive morpheme –*'s* on the verb/auxiliary agreeing with that subject so as to specify the atomicity of the reference denoted by the relevant subject with the feature [3SG/PL], solving, this way, the problem of the referential defectivity of the feature [3SG/PL]. What this means is that when the reference denoted by the subject.3SG/PL is atomic, the allomorph of the genitive morpheme is realized on the verb/auxiliary, and when the reference is not atomic, the morpheme is not realized.

4.2.1. The realization of the morpheme –s on the verb/auxiliary.3SG

The morpheme -*s* is always realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG when two conditions are met, namely when (i) the grammatical subject has an atomic

reference, and (ii) there is no morphophonological constraint impeding that realization.

(10)

    a.   The police   inquires   into the murder.

           DP.3SG   Pres.3SG

$[_{topP}$ the police $[_{top'}$ top Fin $[_{TP}$ ~~the police~~ $[_{T'}[_T \emptyset(T_{PRES})][_{VP}$ ~~the police~~ $[_{V'}[_V$ inquires$]$ into the murder$]]]]]]$

    b.   The committee   has   not met yet.

           DP.3SG   Aux.Pres.3SG

$[_{topP}$ the committee $[_{top'}$ top Fin $[_{TP}$ ~~the committee~~ $[_{T'}[_T$ has$]$ not $[_{VP}$ ~~the committee~~ $[_{V'}[_V$ met$]$ yet$]]]]]]]$

For the producer of the utterance in (10a), *the police* is a single entity whose job is to investigate criminal events. Thus, *the police* (3SG) having a reference considered as atomic, the feature defining the head top is realized as an allomorph of the genitive morpheme – *'s* on the closest non-null element occupying a head position (according to the Minimal Link Condition); in this precise case, that element is the verb *inquires* in the head V position. It is worth recalling that the morphemic realization being talked about here is triggered by the necessity to get rid of the referential (or semantic) defectivity of the feature [3SG] defining the subject *the police* by specifying the atomicity of the reference denoted by this one.

It is worth noting that the morpheme Ø of present tense (T_{PRES}) in the T position, which is the closest head to top, cannot be a support for a bound morpheme because it has no phonological content: it is null. This is why, it does not represent an impediment to the realization of the morpheme -*s* on the second closest head, the verb *inquires*.

The same situation is observed in the utterance in (10b) where *the committee* is the grammatical subject. Indeed, *the committee* is taken to refer to only one entity. To mark this atomicity (or specificity) of the reference denoted by *the committee*, the morpheme -*s* is then realized on the verbal auxiliary *has* which is the non-null head in the closest position to the head top.

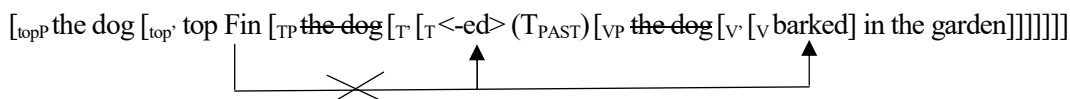*4.2.2. The non-realization of the morpheme –s on the verb/auxiliary.3SG*

First, the morpheme -*s* is not realized on the verb/auxiliary.3SG in past sentences for morphophonological reasons. Indeed, inasmuch as that morpheme, which is the realization of the feature of the head top, is realized on the closest

non-null head in the structure, it is to be realized on the copy of the tense marker -*ed* in T. Nevertheless, the morpheme -*ed* being a bound morpheme, (i) it cannot constitute a support for another bound morpheme, and (ii) it represents a barrier for the realization of the morpheme -*s* on the verb in V for minimality reasons: hence the non-realization of the morpheme.

(11)

      The dog   barked/*barkeds   in the garden.
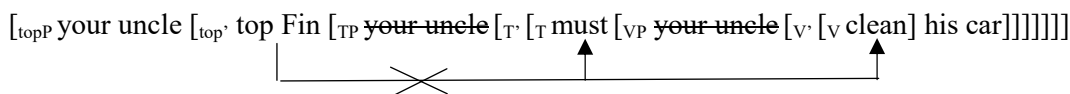
      DP.3SG   Past.3SG

$[_{topP}$ the dog $[_{top'}$ top Fin $[_{TP}$ ~~the dog~~ $[_{T'}$ $[_T$ <-ed> (T_{PAST}) $[_{VP}$ ~~the dog~~ $[_{V'}$ $[_V$ barked] in the garden]]]]]]

In (11), on the one hand, the topic morpheme -*s* cannot be realized on the copy of the tense marker -*ed* in the T position because both are bound morphemes; on the other hand, the morpheme -*ed* represents an obstacle for the realization of the topic morpheme on the verb.3SG *barked*. This is why the phonological module rules out the form *barkeds*.

Next, just like in past sentences, the realization of the morpheme -*s* on the verb.3SG is blocked in sentences containing modal auxiliaries. In fact, the same morphophonological constraint impeding the realization of the morpheme -*s* on the verb.3SG in past sentences is also at stake in sentences with modal auxiliaries.

(12)

    Your uncle   must/*musts   clean his car.

    DP.3SG   Mod.3SG

$[_{topP}$ your uncle $[_{top'}$ top Fin $[_{TP}$ ~~your uncle~~ $[_{T'}$ $[_T$ must $[_{VP}$ ~~your uncle~~ $[_{V'}$ $[_V$ clean] his car]]]]]]

On the one hand, in (12), the morpheme -*s* cannot be realized on the modal *must* because modal auxiliaries function like inflectional morphemes in contemporary English (Cf. Roberts, 1985); this is precisely why they are associated to a verb in its base form, just like inflections. On the other hand, the realization of the morpheme -*s* on the verb *clean* is impossible as well, in the sense that the modal *must* occupying the head T position stands as an impediment to that realization by virtue of its being the closest non-null head to top.

Finally, sentences of the same type as those in (2) contain an embedded non-assertive clause. Even if the embedded clause is headed by the finite

complementizer *that*, that clause has a non-finite verbal element due to its discursive value. Consider, for example, the utterance in (13).

(13)

He insists　[that　　she　　　be　　　respected]

　　　　　　Comp　3SG.Nom　Cop.Unr

$[_{ForceP}$ $[_{Force}$ that] $[_{topP}$ she $[_{top'}$ top Fin $[_{TP}$ ~~she~~ $[_{T'}$ $[_{T}$ $\emptyset_{UNR}]$ $[_{VP}$ ~~she~~ $[_{V'}$ $[_{V}$ be] respected]]]]]]]]

The topic morpheme -*s* is not realized on the closest non-null head (i.e. *be*) in (13) because of the morpheme $\emptyset_{UNR}$ of unreality in the T position which constitutes an impediment to that realization, even if that morpheme is null. Indeed, the role of $\emptyset_{UNR}$ is to suspend any agreement relation in the embedded *that*-clause between the grammatical subject *she* and the verb *be*. The use of the non-finite verb *be* in this clause (despite the nominative Case of the subject *she*), as opposed to the use of finite *is*, is motivated by the fact that, for the speaker, the relation between *she* and the VP *be respected* is not established (yet): it is a hypothetical or fictitious relation. Therefore, the morpheme -*s* cannot be realized when there is the morpheme $\emptyset_{UNR}$ occupying a position between the head top and its target, no matter if the grammatical subject is defined by a feature of third person and has an atomic reference.

Moreover, if the head T in the embedded clause in (13) is defective due to its filling with the morpheme $\emptyset_{UNR}$ of unreality, it means that the subject *she* gets its nominative Case from the finite complementizer *that*, not from T.

5. Conclusion

This paper has been intended to show that subject-verb agreement in contemporary English is not marked morphologically, neither on main verbs nor on auxiliaries. In fact, it seems that the bound morpheme -*s*, which is viewed as both the marker of subject-verb agreement (3SG) and the symbol of this type of agreement in contemporary English, represents the realization of the topic feature of the head top immediately above Fin in the CP domain of finite sentences. In view of the referential or semantic defectivity of the formal feature [3SG/PL], the topic morpheme -*s*, an allomorph of the English genitive morpheme -*'s*, is realized on the closest non-null head as an optimal solution to that defectivity according to the Strong Minimalist Thesis: the objective being to properly interpret the subject.3SG/PL (Cf. Full Interpretation Principle). Clearly, when the grammatical

subject defined by the defective feature [3SG/PL] denotes a reference taken to be atomic by the speaker/writer, the morpheme -*s* is realized, but it is not realized when the reference of the subject is considered as non-atomic. In some sentences (i.e. past sentences, sentences with modal auxiliaries, clauses with non-assertive value, etc.) where the morpheme -*s* is not realized, that realization is hindered by (morpho)phonological or semantic constraints. It is worth mentioning that the realization of the topic morpheme -*s* is not compulsory for grammaticality in the sense that it is just a consequence of the agreement relation between the head top and the nominative subject and the subsequent movement of that subject from [Spec. TP] to [Spec. topP].

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