On the identity of English verbal and plural inflectional *-s*'s

In modern English, so-called agreement marking with regular present tense verbs is highly impoverished, (1), consisting merely of an *-s* with third-person singular subjects.

(1) a.   I play
  b.   You play
  c.   She / he / it play**s**
  d.   We play
  e.   They play

Standard Minimalist generative approaches assume that verbal inflectional *-s* in (1c) results from Agree between uninterpretable features on a functional category Tense and interpretable features on the subject, in conjunction with spell-out rules to account for the absence of overt verbal agreement with non-third person singular subjects. In this talk, in a significant departure from these approaches, I propose a novel account of the restriction of *-s* inflection to third-person singular subjects, combining aspects of a label-free syntax (Collins 2002) with an approach which does not assume interpretable features or functional categories (cf. Boeckx 2014).

Firstly, I argue that nominals can either express (i) conceptual content only, (ii) a combination of conceptual content and a single entity, or (iii) a combination of conceptual content and a set of entities. (i) includes mass nouns (Borer 2005); (ii) includes (in)definite singular noun phrases (e.g. *a / the book*) and third-person singular pronouns (i.e. *she / he / it / one*); and (iii) includes plural noun phrases (e.g. *(the) books*), the plural pronouns *we* and *they*, and, much less conventionally, the first and second singular pronouns *I* and *you*, building on Kayne (1989). In particular, both pronouns and the plural inflectional *-s* are argued to be inherently 'lexical' items rather than occupying a distinguished 'functional' class: pronouns expressing both conceptual content and a certain entity denotation, and the plural inflectional *-s* expressing a set of entities only.

Secondly, I propose that present tense verbs in English must necessarily denote a set of entities, in order to derive their habitual/generic aspect. Verbs which Merge with a subject which denotes a set of entities, straightforwardly satisfy this requirement, whilst those which Merge with a subject which denotes a single entity, or conceptual content only do not. I argue that this is precisely the basis for the impoverished paradigm in (1): verb phrases with third-person singular subjects require the *-s* inflection in order to denote a set of entities. More specifically, I propose that the verbal inflection *-s* *is* the nominal plural inflectional *-s*, presenting evidence from various different domains (phonology, morphology, semantics, diachrony) for this conclusion. As such, this talk advocates a rethinking of the application of traditional lexical categories (noun vs. verb), as well as the need for functional categories like Tense.

References: • Boeckx, Cedric (2014). *Elementary syntactic structures: Prospects of a feature-free syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. • Borer, Hagit. 2005. *Structuring sense volume I: In name only*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Collins, Chris (2002). "Eliminating labels." In: S. D. Epstein & T. D. Seely (Eds.), *Derivation and explanation in the Minimalist Program* (pp. 42-64). Blackwell Publisher. • Kayne, Richard S. 1989. "Notes on English agreement." Reprinted in: Kayne, Richard S. 2000. *Parameters and universals*, Oxford University Press.