

United Cyclic Agree

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Abstract. The operation Agree has been defined in many different ways for different purposes. This presents a problem for minimalist syntax, since no one form of Agree can explain all of the relevant generalizations. It becomes especially problematic when multiple versions of Agree must exist simultaneously on the same probe in order to explain different phenomena. This article examines two such phenomena in Basque finite verb agreement: ergative displacement and the Strong Person-Case Constraint, and the theories that account for them: Cyclic Agree (Béjar & Rezac 2009) and Feature Gluttony (Coon & Keine 2021). A combined approach called United Cyclic Agree is proposed, which captures the advantages of both theories without generating any new erroneous predictions. In this theory, all of the segments in a probe continue probing in successive cycles until they all have matching goals or there is nowhere left to probe.

Keywords. syntax; morphology; agreement; person-case constraint; Basque; feature gluttony; Cyclic Agree

1. Introduction. The operation Agree is well-established as a mechanism by which morphosyntactic features are copied at a distance within syntactic structures. However, there is little “agreement” on how Agree functions, with many different versions having been proposed to account for different specific phenomena (Béjar & Rezac 2009; Zeijlstra 2012; Coon & Keine 2021; Deal 2015; i.a.). A minimalist account should prefer only a single version of Agree (Chomsky 1993, 2000), or at the very least, an Agree that is parameterized by language, or by probe. However, in some cases, we find that two different phenomena are explained by positing different, mutually exclusive versions of Agree that are supposed to exist in the same probe.

Here I present one such example, from Basque, where the phenomenon of ergative displacement is best explained by Cyclic Agree (Béjar & Rezac 2009), and the phenomenon of the Strong Person-Case Constraint (PCC) is best explained by the theory of Feature Gluttony (Coon & Keine 2021). I then propose a hybrid theory, United Cyclic Agree, which accounts for both phenomena without creating any new erroneous predictions. This solves the two-Agrees-one-probe problem and reduces the number of versions of Agree required to account for all agreement phenomena by one.

2. Background. Basque only allows a closed class of verbs to take agreement, tense, and mood morphology (De Rijk 2007). These include the auxiliaries *izan* and *edun*, which are used with intransitive and transitive verbs respectively to create finite clauses, as well as other “synthetic” verbs. The case alignment system is morphologically ergative-absolutive (though it is not “syntactically ergative” (Oyharçabal 1992)). There are also psych verbs like *gustatu* ‘like’ which assign dative case to their subject and absolutive case to their object.

The finite verbs are quite morphologically complex, with affixes that reference the tense, mood, and person and number of the absolutive, dative, and ergative arguments. In particular, up to one argument’s person features can be indexed by a prefix on the verb. The remainder will be

* Thanks to Suzana Fong, Bill Haddican, Richard Luo, Catarina Soares, Natalie Weber, Jim Wood, Ka Fai Yip, and Raffaella Zanuttini for their advice and feedback, as well as to the audience at the 2024 LSA Annual Meeting. Author: Squid Tamar-Mattis, Yale University (squid.tamar-mattis@yale.edu).

indexed by suffixes. Third-person is not overtly indexed, except for third-person singular dative arguments, but plurality will be indexed for third-person plural arguments. If there is no person prefix, the verb will instead take a prefix that (redundantly) references the tense and mood.

- (1) Ni-k zu-e-i oparia-k eman n-i-zki-zue-n
 I-ERG you-PL-DAT present-PL.ABS given 1SG-AUX-pl-2PL-PST
 ‘I have given y’all gifts.’

In some dialects, there is also a formality distinction for the second-person singular. If such a distinction exists, there is also a gender distinction in the second-person informal singular. Furthermore, a familiar addressee may be indexed by a suffix, even if they are not an argument of the verb.

- (2) Bihar egin-go d-i-a-t
 tomorrow do-IRR PRES-AUX-2.FAM.MASC-1SG
 (To a man) ‘Tomorrow I will do it.’ (Haddican 2018:2)

Following Preminger (2009a), I take the person prefix to be a genuine result of spellout of the features acquired through agreement, whereas the person/number suffixes are doubled clitics. However, clitic doubling also (at least sometimes) requires an Agree relation between the destination and source of the clitic (Preminger 2009a, 2019; Coon & Keine 2021; Deal 2022).

I assume a model like Distributed Morphology, where the syntax builds structures out of abstract feature bundles that are later realized through vocabulary insertion (Halle & Marantz 1993). Person features are arranged in a feature geometry shown by (3), and each argument contains a subtree of this hierarchy (Harley & Ritter 2002).

- (3)
- $$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{PERS} \\
 | \\
 \text{PART} \\
 \swarrow \quad \searrow \\
 \text{SPKR} \quad \text{ADDR}
 \end{array}$$

In both of the theories of Agree that will be considered, each probe bears some number of unvalued feature segments like [*u*PERS] (Béjar & Rezac 2009). When Agree occurs, the probe searches for valued features to match its unvalued features, copying at least some of them back. Failure to find a matching feature does not cause the derivation to fail (Preminger 2009b). At issue, though, is where a probe searches for goals, how it treats the features it copies back, and how those features are handled by the morphology.

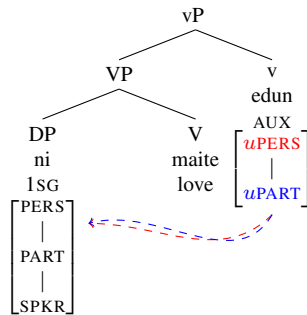
2.1. **ERGATIVE DISPLACEMENT AND CYCLIC AGREE.** The finite verb prefix that can reference either an argument or the tense and mood is determined in the following way: if the absolutive argument has a [PART] feature, it references the absolutive argument (4a, 4b). Otherwise, if there is an ergative argument with a [PART] feature and the tense is not the present tense, then it references the ergative argument (4c); this is called **ergative displacement**. As a last resort, if neither argument can be referenced, the verb takes a tense/mood prefix (4d).

- (4) a. *Itxaso-k (ni) maite na-u.* (3ERG > 1ABS)
Itxaso-ERG 1SG.ABS love 1SG-AUX
 ‘Itxaso loves me.’
- b. *Itxaso-k (ni) maite n-ind-u-en.* (3ERG > 1ABS)
Itxaso-ERG 1SG.ABS love 1SG-IND-AUX-PST
 ‘Itxaso loved me.’
- c. *(Ni-k) Itxaso maite n-u-en.* (1ERG > 3ABS)
1SG-ERG Itxaso.ABS love 1SG-AUX-PST
 ‘I loved Itxaso.’
- d. *(Ni-k) Itxaso maite d-u-t.* (1ERG > 3ABS)
1SG-ERG Itxaso.ABS love PRS-AUX-1SG
 ‘I love Itxaso.’

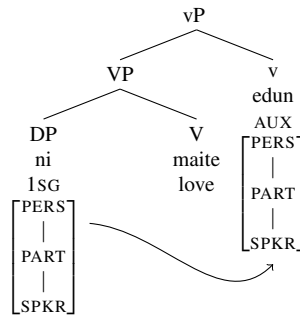
This is explained by **Cyclic Agree** (Rezac 2003; Béjar & Rezac 2009). Under this theory, when a probe is merged, every segment searches its c-command domain for the closest matching goal, if one is present. Then, after the probe’s specifier is merged, a second cycle of Agree occurs every segment that has not found a goal searches the specifier.¹ When a segment [*u*F] finds a goal with [F], the probe copies back [F] and all features of the goal that entail [F]. If the probe ends up copying the same feature multiple times, the extra copies are deleted or otherwise rendered unimportant. The probe at *v* in Basque, which is responsible for the finite verb prefixes, bears [*u*PERS [*u*PART]]. Thus, in Basque, [*u*PART] searches its c-command domain for a first- or second-person argument. If it fails to find one, it looks upward, and eventually finds the ergative argument.

(5) Derivation of (4b) ‘Itxaso loved me’:

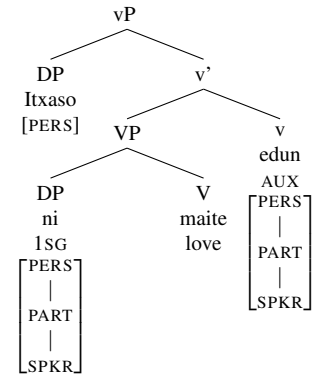
a. Both probe segments find the same goal.



b. The goal’s features are copied to the probe.



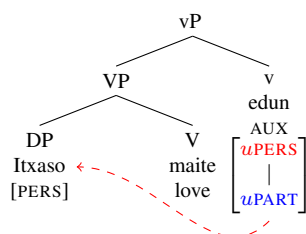
c. The subject is merged.



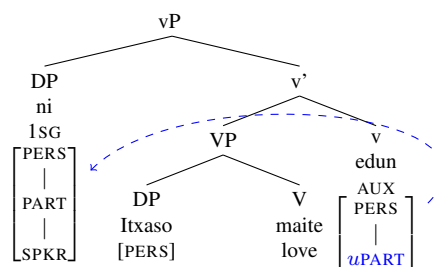
¹ There is evidence for a third cycle, where the probe searches the c-command domain of its maximal projection (Clem 2022), but that is not relevant here.

(6) Derivation of (4c) ‘I loved Itxaso’:

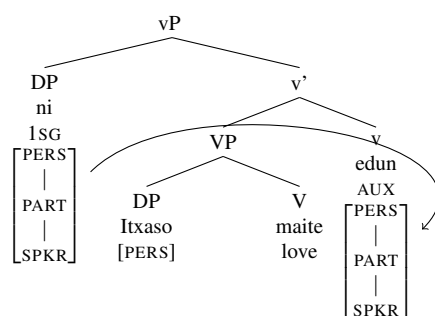
- a. On the first cycle of Agree, only [uPERS] finds a matching goal.



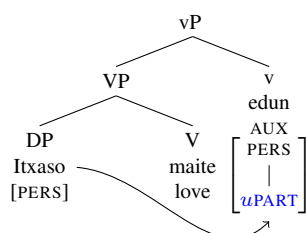
- c. The subject is merged, and another cycle of Agree occurs.



- d. The remaining features are copied to the probe, granting it first-person agreement morphology.



- b. [PERS] is copied back to the probe.



Thus Cyclic Agree successfully accounts for ergative displacement.

2.2. THE STRONG PCC AND FEATURE GLUTTONY. Basque also has the **Strong Person-Case Constraint** (PCC), which bans first- and second-person absolutive arguments from occurring in a finite clause with a higher dative argument (Laka 1993).

- (7) a. Zu-k harakina-ri liburua saldu d-i-o-zu
you-ERG butcher-DAT book.ABS sold PRS-AUX-3SG-2SG
‘You have sold a book to the butcher.’ (✓3DAT > 3ABS)

- b. *Zu-k harakina-ri ni saldu na-i-o-zu
you-ERG butcher-DAT 1SG.ABS sold 1SG-AUX-3SG-2SG
Intended: ‘You have sold me to the butcher.’ (*3DAT > 1ABS)
(adapted from Keine & Mendia (2022:1-2))

- (8) a. Miren-i sintaxia gustatzen zai-o
Miren-DAT syntax.ABS like.IMPF AUX-3SG
‘Miren likes syntax.’ (✓3 DAT > 3ABS)

- b. *Miren-i zu gustatzen za-tzai-o
Miren-DAT you.ABS like.IMPF 2SG-AUX-3SG
Intended: ‘Miren likes you.’ (*3DAT > 2ABS)

Béjar & Rezac (2009) have a Cyclic Agree explanation for this, but it relies on the Person Licensing Condition (PLC) (see also Béjar & Rezac (2003)), which claims that any argument with a [PART] feature must be licensed by Agree. Indeed, most approaches to the PLC (e.g. Deal (2022)) rely on the PLC. Such approaches are deficient because they fail to account for the fact that the PCC does not apply in non-finite clauses (9), or when the finite verb is not pronounced (10).

- (9) Gaizki iruditzen zai-t [zu-k harakina-ri ni sal-tze-a]
 wrong seem.IMPF AUX-1SG you-ERG butcher-DAT me.ABS sell-IMP-ART.ABS
 ‘It seems wrong to me for you to sell me to the butcher.’ (✓3DAT > 1ABS)
 (adapted from Keine & Mendia (2022:2))

- (10) Jon-ek alkatea-ri Mikel saldu d-i-o, eta zu-k harakina-ri
 Jon-ERG mayor-DAT Mikel.ABS sold PRES-AUX-3SG, and you-ERG butcher-DAT
 ni –
 me.ABS –
 ‘Jon has sold Mikel to the mayor, and you me to the butcher.’ (✓3DAT > 1ABS)
 (adapted from Keine & Mendia (2022:5))

Arregi & Nevins (2012) present an approach that does not rely on the PLC and accounts for ergative displacement and (9), but it still does not generate (10). It also doesn’t generalize well beyond Basque.

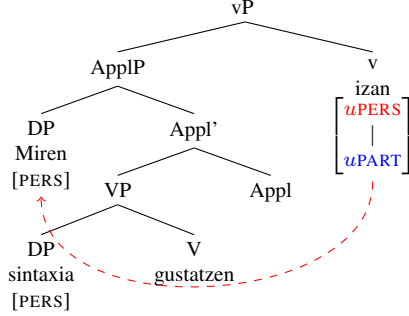
Coon & Keine (2021) account for this with their own version of segment-based Agree. This is different from Béjar & Rezac (2009)’s theory in two key ways. First, probes only search their c-command domains, rather than probing upward in later Agree cycles. This is, of course, not strange. Second, when a segment copies a feature hierarchy back to the goal, it copies the entire feature hierarchy and stores it separately from other feature hierarchies that might have been copied by other segments on the same probe. No deletion of redundant features is necessarily assumed to take place (though the morphology might specify such deletion). This can become a problem at vocabulary insertion. If a probe has accumulated two or more separate feature hierarchies and the morphology lacks a vocabulary item that corresponds to both of them (or a rule to delete all but one of them), it will be impossible to spell out the probe. Such a probe is said to be **gluttonous**, and it causes the derivation to crash unless something else (e.g. ellipsis) allows it to not be spelled out.

A minor point that turns out to be critical to this analysis is that dative arguments are treated as formally third-person by Agree. Datives have been found to have a similar property in, e.g., Icelandic (Boeckx 2000; Richards 2008; Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008). This explains why the person of the dative argument is not relevant to the PCC.

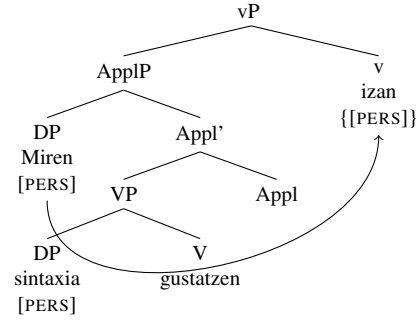
The analysis claims that (7b) and (8b) are ungrammatical because their probes have become gluttonous by copying multiple feature hierarchies from their dative and absolutive arguments.

(11) Derivation of (8a) ‘Miren likes syntax’ (no PCC violation):

- a. [*u*PERS] finds the dative argument, while [*u*PART] fails to find a matching goal.

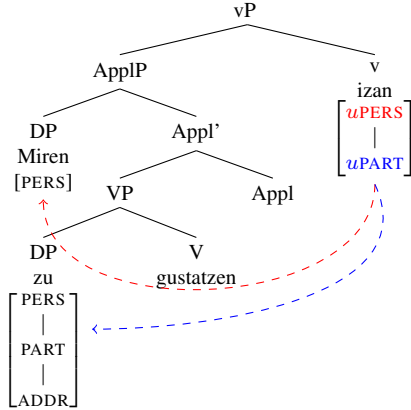


- b. [*u*PERS] is copied back to the probe.

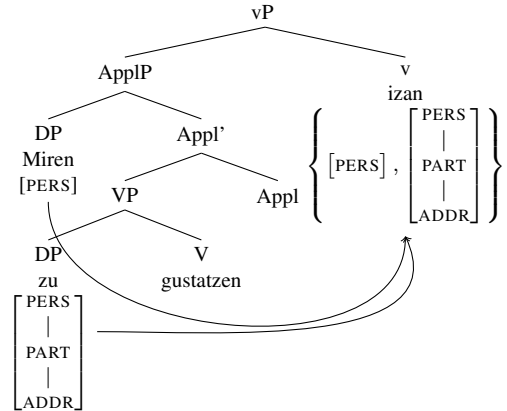


(12) Attempted derivation of (8b) ‘Miren likes you’ (PCC violation):

- a. [*u*PERS] finds the dative argument, while [*u*PART] finds the absolutive argument.



- b. Both sets of features are copied back to the probe.



Since Basque has no way to spell out the gluttonous probe, it causes ungrammaticality. The ditransitive scenarios are essentially the same. Because Agree is only downward, the ergative argument cannot affect the probe.

Unfortunately, the downward nature of this form of Agree means that there is no explanation for ergative displacement. Both theories are deficient.

3. Proposal. Since neither theory of Agree is sufficient to account for the two phenomena at issue, we need to take a combined approach, which I call **United Cyclic Agree**.

I also bring in an element from the theory proposed by Arregi & Nevins (2012), adopting their distinction between **Agree-link** and **Agree-copy**. Agree-link is a syntactic operation that creates Agree relations between probes and goals. Agree-copy is a morphological operation that copies features from a goal to a probe that has established an Agree relation with it. Together, they accomplish what we think of as agreement. However, analyze an Agree relation as existing between an unvalued feature segment and goal, rather than between a probe and a goal. Agree-link is the only cyclic part of United Cyclic Agree. Agree-copy occurs only once.

(13) *United Agree-link*

Let P be a probe with a hierarchy of unvalued feature segments. After a tree α headed by P is Merged with a tree β , if P has any unvalued features that have not established Agree relations, do the following:

1. For each unvalued feature $[uF]$ in P, search β for the closest argument containing $[F]$.
2. Each $[uF]$ that found a matching goal establishes an Agree relation with that goal. This replaces $[uF]$'s existing Agree relation, if it had one.

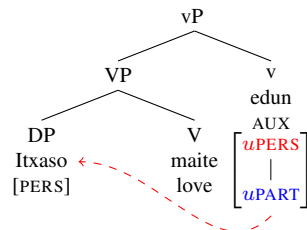
(14) *United Agree-copy*

For a probe P, copy the entire feature hierarchy from every goal X that has one or more Agree relations with unvalued features on P.

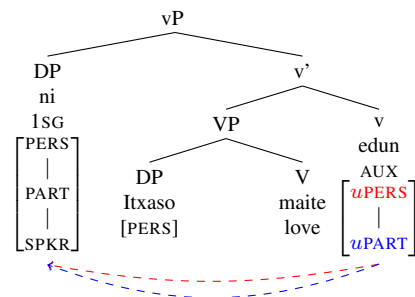
The critical element of this theory is that if any unvalued feature still needs an Agree relation, then every unvalued feature has a chance to overwrite its existing Agree relation if it finds a new matching goal. Having a configuration of Agree relations that will cause gluttony does not allow Agree to happen again, because the syntax has no way to tell that it will cause gluttony. In configurations with a 1st- or 2nd-person absolutive argument (PCC-violating or otherwise) like (4b), (7b), and (8b), this works effectively the same way as Coon & Keine (2021)'s Agree. Both segments of the probe are satisfied in the first cycle of Agree-link. The unique behavior occurs in configurations that trigger ergative displacement, where $[uPERS]$ will find the absolutive argument, but will switch its Agree relation to the ergative argument on the second cycle.

(15) Derivation of (4c) 'I loved Itxaso' under United Cyclic Agree:

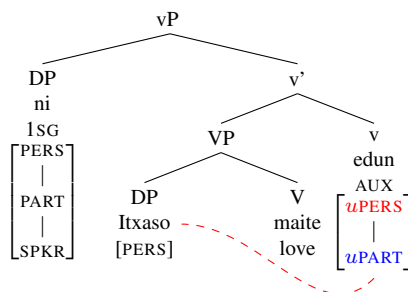
- a. On the first cycle of Agree, only $[uPERS]$ finds a matching goal.



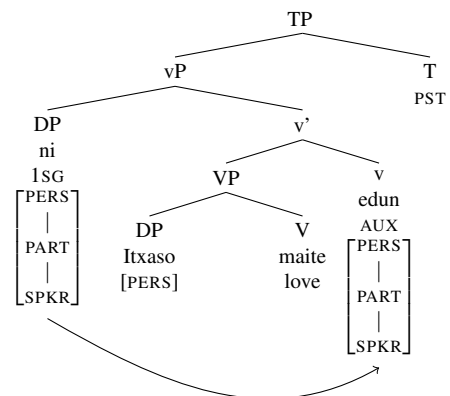
- c. Since $[uPART]$ has not found a goal, both segments probe again, and find the same goal.



- b. The subject is merged.



- d. Later, the goal's features are copied back to the probe.



4. Against the naive approach. There is a simpler way to combine Cyclic Agree with Feature Gluttony.

(16) *Combined Agree* (first attempt)

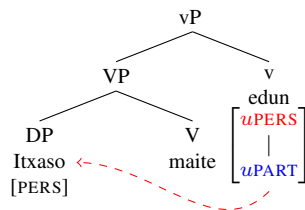
Let P be a probe with a hierarchy of unvalued feature segments. After a tree α headed by P is Merged with a tree β , do the following:

1. For each unvalued feature $[uF]$ in P, search β for the highest argument containing $[F]$.
2. P establishes an Agree relation with every argument that is found by a probe segment (i.e. the closest argument containing $[F]$ for each $[uF]$).
3. Copy the feature hierarchy of every argument P has established an Agree relation with, replacing the matching unvalued features on P. If multiple feature hierarchies are copied (in the same cycle or different cycles), store them separately.

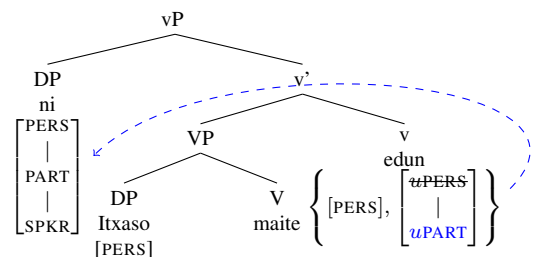
Under this analysis, since Agree occurs every time a tree headed by P is Merged, there is one cycle where P searches its complement, followed by a cycle where P searches its specifier, and a third where P searches the sister of its maximal projection. This causes it to make the same predictions as Coon & Keine (2021)'s segment-based Agree for PCC-violating configurations like (7b) and (8b), since in those, all probe segments find goals in the first cycle. It also makes the same prediction for all clauses without an external argument, since later cycles will not have possible goals. However, consider what happens with a simple transitive clause with a third-person object and non-third-person subject.

(17) Derivation of (4c) 'I loved Itxaso' under the theory in (16):

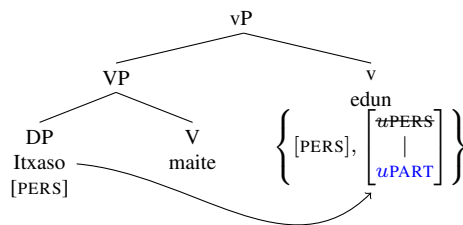
- a. On the first cycle of Agree, only $[uPERS]$ finds a matching goal.



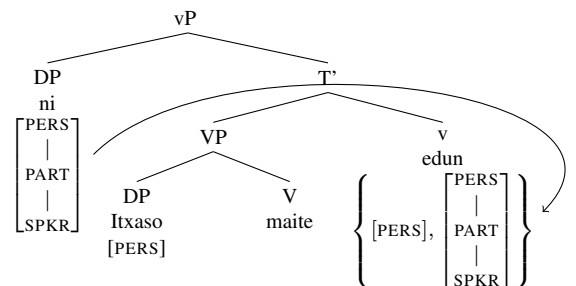
- c. The subject is merged, and another cycle of Agree occurs, with $[uPART]$ probing again.



- b. $[PERS]$ is copied back to the probe.



- d. The subject's features are copied to the probe.



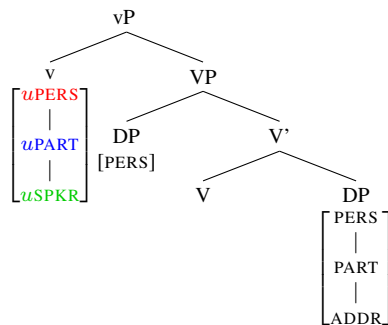
The probe in (17d) ends up with the same features as the one in (12b). But that probe was gluttonous! Thus, this theory predicts that (4c) should be ungrammatical. Since (4c) is grammatical, the theory must be incorrect. More generally, this approach to Agree predicts what we might term the “Overwhelmingly Strong” PCC, where (in a clause with a pronounced finite verb) a non-third-person ergative argument cannot occur with a third-person absolutive argument, or a dative argument. Empirically, the Strong PCC is indifferent to ergative arguments.

5. Predictions. United cyclic Agree has interesting consequences that are not predicted by Béjar & Rezac (2009) or Coon & Keine (2021)’s approaches.

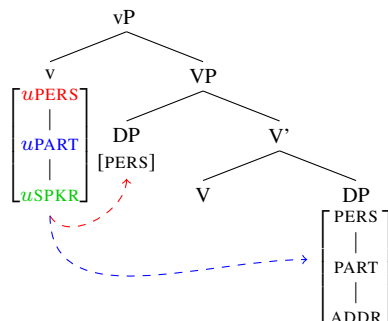
5.1. LATER CYCLES MIGHT FIX A POTENTIAL PCC VIOLATION. If a probe has three or more unvalued features (strictly linear or otherwise), it should be possible to create a potentially gluttonous configuration of Agree relations in the first cycle that turns into a non-potentially-gluttonous configuration in a later cycle. Languages with the Ultrastrong PCC are theorized to have probes with the features [*u*PERS [*u*PART [*u*SPKR]]] (Coon & Keine 2021). If such a language has a clause with a third-person dative argument and lower second-person internal argument, that configuration might be gluttonous unless there is also a first-person external argument, as schematized in (18). I will call this **cyclic PCC rescue**. Unfortunately, Ultrastrong PCC languages are rare, so this is difficult to test empirically.

(18) Cyclic PCC rescue in a hypothetical Ultrastrong PCC language:

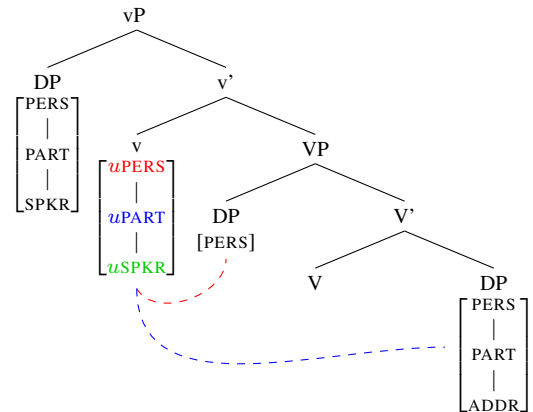
- a. A *v* head containing an Ultrastrong probe merges with a VP containing an indirect object and a second-person direct object.



- b. A cycle of Agree-link occurs. *u*PERS and *u*PART find (different) matching goals. The resulting configuration would cause gluttony if Agree-copy occurred now.

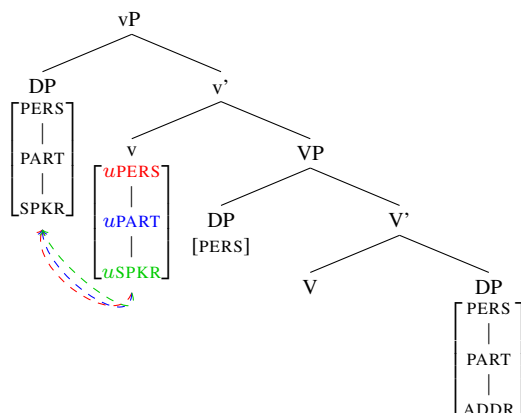


- c. The first-person external argument is merged.

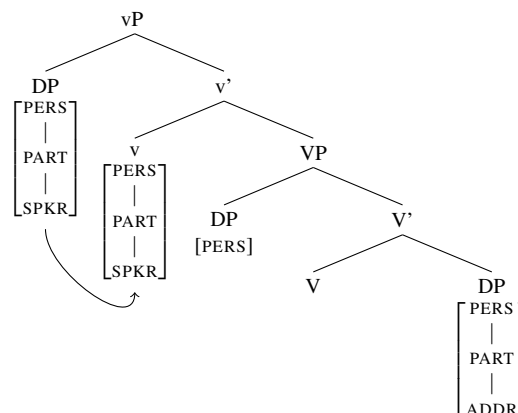


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- d. Since [*u*SPKR] didn't find a matching goal before, all three unvalued features search again, and they all find the external argument. The configuration will no longer lead to gluttony.



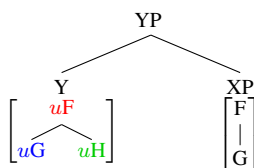
- e. When Agree-copy occurs, the external argument's features are copied to the probe, yielding first-person agree-ment morphology.



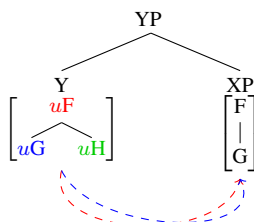
5.2. GLUTTONY FROM MULTIPLE CYCLES. The configuration of unvalued features in the Basque *v* probe does not allow external arguments to cause gluttony, but a different configuration could. Suppose a language has a probe *P* with the features [*u*F] [*u*G] [*u*H]]. Then a configuration where *P* has a goal bearing [F [G]] in its complement and a goal bearing [F [H]] in its specifier can cause *P* to become gluttonous. This can only occur with a probe that is not strictly linear (i.e. one that contains unvalued features [*u*G] and [*u*H]] such that [*u*G] does not dominate [*u*H]] and [*u*H]] does not dominate [*u*G]]).

(19) Hypothetical derivation of a cyclically caused PCC violation:

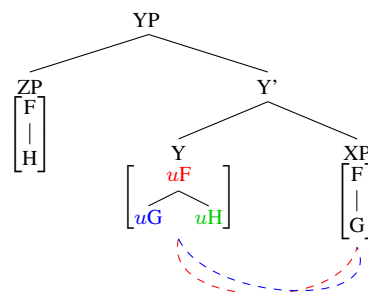
- a. A probe *Y* bearing a nonlinear configuration of unvalued features merges with a goal *XP* containing a subset of matching features.



- b. One cycle of Agree-link occurs. [*u*H] fails to find a goal.

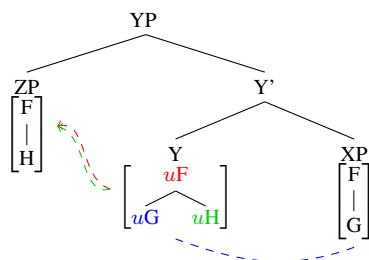


- c. *ZP* is merged in Spec,YP.

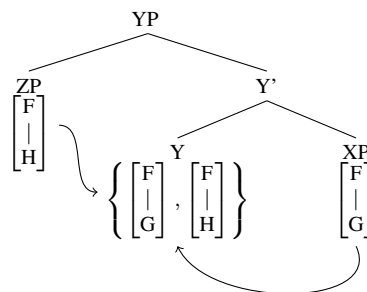


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- d. Since $[uH]$ still has no goal, another cycle of Agree-link occurs. $[uF]$ switches to the higher goal in ZP, which $[uH]$ finds as well. $[uG]$ finds no new goal, and therefore keeps its old relation.



- e. When Agree-copy occurs, features from XP and ZP are copied back to the probe, potentially causing it to become gluttonous.



6. Conclusion. United Cyclic Agree explains both ergative displacement and the PCC in Basque under a single theory. It also correctly predicts agreement in regular configurations, so it provides strictly better empirical coverage than Béjar & Rezac (2009) or Coon & Keine (2021)’s analyses. However, some questions remain; foremost among them: why does cyclicity fail to occur in the present tense? This is an open question about regular Cyclic Agree as well (Rezac 2003, 2004). An empirical question that remains is that of whether any language has cyclic PCC rescue or the possibility of cyclically caused PCC violations. Since a probe that permits the latter can theoretically permit the former, perhaps there is a language with both.

7. Appendix: Absolute promotion. As a last-resort strategy for repairing the PCC for psych verbs, the absolute argument can be “promoted” to ergative case, but retains its θ -role (typically “theme”) (Rezac 2006, 2016; Arregi & Nevins 2008, 2012). This means the auxiliary takes the form it would have with a ditransitive verb, with the theme represented as the ergative argument and a third-person singular absolutive argument (though whether the theme actually takes an ergative suffix is a matter of inter-speaker variation).

- (20) a. *Ni-ri zu gustatzen za-tzai-t
 I-DAT you.ABS like 2SG-AUX-1SG
 Intended: ‘I like you.’
- b. Ni-ri {%zu / %zu-k} gustatzen d-i-da-zu
 I-DAT {you.ABS / you-ERG} like PRS-AUX-1SG-2SG
 ‘I like you.’

On some accounts, the theme originates as V’s complement, where it receives its θ -role, and then sometime before Agree, it moves to the position where an ergative argument would originate (Rezac 2016). This might seem to be incompatible with Agree-link occurring immediately after the probe is merged. At that time, there will be no external argument position for the theme to move to. One possible solution is that when the theme moves, it leaves behind a featureless trace, breaking its Agree relation with the $[uPART]$ on the probe, thereby causing a second cycle

of Agree-link. On the other hand, some kinds of movement (e.g. topicalization, wh-movement) do not affect the resulting agreement morphology, as shown by (21).

- (21) a. **Ni-k** **zu** maite **zait-u-t**
I-ERG **you.ABS** love **2SG-AUX-1SG**
 ‘I love you.’
- b. **Zu** **ni-k** <zu> maite **zait-u-t**
you.ABS **I-ERG** <you.ABS> love **2SG-AUX-1SG**
 ‘I love **you**.’

Thus, different types of movement may leave different kinds of residue. Movement that does not disrupt agreement could be caused by multidominance (Epstein et al. 1998). Alternatively, all movement disrupts Agree relations, but Agree-copy occurs in the syntax rather than as a post-syntactic operation. Specifically, it could occur after the probe’s maximal projection merges with something else.

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