
Mismatch patterns in polite plural: A study on Farsi

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In many languages, plural pronouns are used to express politeness when addressing a single honorific individual (Brown & Levinson 1987), resulting in the syntax–semantics mismatch between a singular referent and its plural form. Comrie (1975) shows that while in some languages all target components symmetrically agree with polite plurals, in others the honorific pronoun controls plural agreement only on certain components. This distinction motivates a typology of *uniform* versus *mixed* agreement systems. Notably, when some target components exhibit plural agreement with polite pronouns, they tend to do so consistently.

Colloquial Farsi data shows that number disagreement can be strategically employed to convey an *Honorific* yet *Intimate* relationship with the addressee. Example (1) features a plural subject pronoun *šoma*, while the corresponding object POSSessive pronoun and the verb appear in singular form, resulting in a number mismatch with the pronoun controller. Notably, in (2), the use of plural object possessive pronoun, agreeing with the plural subject, alongside a singular verb result in infelicity. This suggests that, the number feature must be symmetrically underspecified across all target components in the sentence.

- (1) *šoma* čae-*t* ro xord-i? [asking from your grandma]
you.2.PL tea-2.SG.POSS ACC ate-2.SG
‘Did you drink your tea?’
- (2) # *šoma* čae-tun ro xord-i?
you.2.PL tea-2.PL.POSS ACC ate-2.SG

Crucially, the pattern is pragmatically infelicitous in the absence of intimacy, e.g. by addressing a socially superior individual. Moreover, speakers use the plural marker *-hā* with *šoma* (as *šoma-hā*), unnecessarily redundant, not only to reinforce plurality and resolve the ambiguity of *šoma*, but also to signal an informal register.

This study investigates Farsi number (dis)agreement at the syntax–pragmatics. We propose that number feature is strategically underspecified to signal intimacy alongside politeness. The underspecification operates symmetrically across all relevant targets. Thus, although the polite plural appears to mismatch its targets, we argue that Farsi exhibits uniform (dis)agreement: the plural honorific either enforces uniform agreement or uniform disagreement across all relevant targets. The data also suggests that *šoma* is undergoing a semantic shift, losing its plural feature while retaining its honorification. If the honorific of *šoma* is lexicalized, the observed number disagreement indeed reflects agreement with this denotation.

References: • Brown, P. & S. C. Levinson (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. • Comrie, B. (1975). Polite plurals and predicate agreement. *Language* 5.