

Default case and the status of compound categories in Distributed Morphology

It is commonly argued that certain familiar morphological categories are not primitives, but compound entities defined in terms of a combination of features. In this way, instances of syncretism can be captured by assuming that the categories involved have one or more features in common. E.g., nominative-accusative syncretisms are often accounted for by assuming that a feature like [-oblique] is involved in the definition of both categories (see Jakobson, 1936; Bierwisch, 1967; Halle, 1997; Müller, 2004, among many others). While this approach seems to be on the right track, I will argue in this talk that it needs to be more heavily constrained. In particular, the specific features assumed in order to handle syncretism must be adequately motivated on independent syntactic (or semantic) grounds. The number of distinct forms postulated may be reduced, but if the number of primitive morpho-syntactic features must be increased in to do this, it is not clear that an overall reduction in complexity has been achieved. Furthermore, without explicit extra-morphological grounding, it is difficult to decide between the logically possible feature compositions for a given category. It is dubious to claim that a particular pattern of syncretism found in a particular language has been explained if the theoretical apparatus used to do so could be used to ‘explain’ every other logically possible pattern of syncretism in the same paradigm. These issues are particularly acute in the treatment of case systems, because, in contrast to say persons, numbers or tenses, it is far from clear that most cases have a semantic correlate with which we could anchor them in the syntax. It is perhaps for this reason that the categories assumed by syntacticians and morphologists differ even more than usual when it comes to case (compare the decompositional accounts of case syncretism cited above with the assumption of monolithic case categories in syntactic works like Yip, Maling, and Jackendoff, 1987; Chomsky, 2001; Sigurðsson, 2003, and others).

I will propose that the way to avoid these potential problems is to take seriously the idea that the relevant categories are composite, not just as the morphology sees them, but also as the syntax does. In other words, there is no syntactic notion of accusative case that is translated into a feature bundle like [-oblique, +governed] for the morphology. Rather, the features that regulate the possibilities for morphological syncretism are the same ones that are manipulated by the syntax. In this way, proposals of morphological feature inventories can be constrained by syntactic plausibility: the postulation of some feature to account for morphological facts must ultimately be backed by an explicit theory of its syntactic distribution. This is an application of one of the leading ideas of Distributed Morphology – that the interface between syntax and morphology is trivial, and thus our analyses of phenomena which appear to be on one side of it must be informed by considerations of how it will fit in with the other. Assuming this DM background, I will propose that assignment of case to a particular DP is not necessarily a single operation. Rather the relevant features that make up a category are assigned independently of each other, each on the basis of its own syntactic criteria. A result of this view is that (certain) markedness relationships can be derived instead of being stipulated: a DP that meets the criteria to trigger the assignment of a particular case feature is marked relative to another which does not. This will provide us with a way to deal with things like the fact that the nominative is the default case category in German and many other languages. Individual default forms like the English past tense suffix *-ed* can be handled through underspecification of the relevant vocabulary item, but this strategy is not available for entire categories. On the other hand, a rule that says explicitly “assign nominative when all else fails” seems to miss the point of a default. I will argue that under my theory of case-assignment, the default nature of the nominative can be captured by defining it in terms of unmarked values for the case features. I will show that this actually falls out from the role that nominative case plays in the structural case system.

References

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