Marking the unmarked:
Exceptional patterns of syncretism in English and Hindi

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In recent models of morphosyntactic feature geometry, unmarked features are often absent and necessarily underspecified. At the same time, underspecification is held to be the primary source of morphological syncretism. Together, these two approaches predict that morphological forms associated with unmarked features will always be the most likely candidates for syncretism. While this is generally true, there are exceptional cases in which the form associated with unmarked features is precisely the one that does not participate in syncretism. I illustrate instances of this kind and argue that they provide evidence for a different kind of feature geometry – one in which unmarked features are available for specification.

By most accounts, 3\textsuperscript{rd} person (3P) is the unmarked person, singular (SG) the unmarked number, and nominative (NOM) the unmarked case. For Harley & Ritter (2002), 3P is not a feature in the geometry. Rather, it is the absence of person features and arises only as a default interpretation of an underspecified root node. Cowper (2005a) takes a similar approach to SG, and Béjar & Hall (1999) take a similar approach to NOM. This approach to unmarked features cannot account for patterns of syncretism like those in (1).

(1) a. English present tense verbs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3P</th>
<th>2P</th>
<th>1P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>walk-s</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>walk</td>
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b. Hindi masculine adjectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NOM</th>
<th>OBL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>baḍ-aa</td>
<td>baḍ-e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>baḍ-e</td>
<td>baḍ-e</td>
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‘big’

If syncretism is the product of underspecification, then the syncretic forms in (1) should be underspecified. However, if unmarked features are necessarily underspecified, then the non-syncretic forms must be underspecified. Two underspecified forms in a single paradigm would not be distinguishable. Thus, any apparent syncretism in (1) can only be accidental homophony (e.g., English /walk/ [PL] vs. /walk/ [PARTICIPANT] (=1P/2P), Hindi /baḍ-əl/ [PL] vs. /baḍ-əl/ [OBL]).

In response to this problem, I propose a model in which unmarked features are available, but maintain a default status (structurally defined, not stipulated). As a result of their default status, languages do not need to specify unmarked features, and for reasons of parsimony, they rarely do. Thus, the model preserves the generalization that unmarked features are typically underspecified. However, it predicts two possible systems: one that specifies marked features alone, and one that specifies both marked and unmarked features. The second system is posited for languages like English and Hindi. This allows for a simple solution to the paradigms in (1): the non-syncretic forms are specified for unmarked features (English /walk-s/ [3P, SG], Hindi /baḍ-aa/ [NOM, SG]) while the syncretic forms in these paradigms are underspecified.

The proposed model provides a simple solution to the exceptional patterns in (1) without recourse to homophony. It represents a minimal retreat from the restrictiveness of previous models by allowing for the explicit specification of unmarked features while preserving markedness and dependency relationships among features. It also makes an empirically verifiable prediction: a morphological form which is uniquely specified for unmarked features cannot be syncretic. This prediction is borne out in all of the examples examined thus far.
References


