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

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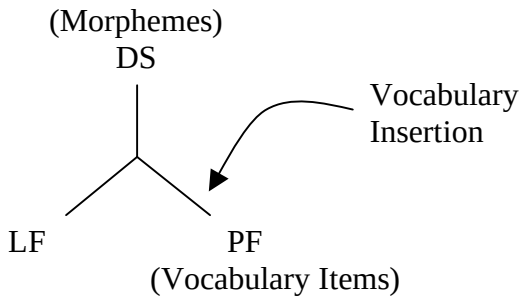
1. Introduction

- This paper addresses a particular approach to morphosyntactic feature geometry.
- In this approach the 'unmarked' = 'least specified'.
- I argue: unmarked ≠ least specified (in some instances).
- Languages must have the option of uniquely specifying umarked features (i.e., 'marking the unmarked').
- Motivation: exceptional patterns of syncretism in which unmarked features behave as though they are uniquely specified (e.g., English, Hindi).

2. Theoretical background: Distributed Morphology

- In DM a distinction is made between morphemes & Vocabulary Items (VI).
- Morphemes have morphosyntactic features but no phonological content.
- VIs have both morphosyntactic features and phonological content; they are inserted after syntax to spell out morphemes at PF.
- Subset Principle: A VI qualifies for insertion if it matches all or a subset of the features on the morpheme.
- If more than one VI qualifies for insertion, then the most specific one is selected (i.e., the maximal subset).
- Syncretism is the product of underspecification. An underspecified VI can spell out multiple morphemes.

(1)



- The less specified the VI, the wider its distribution.
- The VI with the widest distribution (i.e., the 'elsewhere' form) is the least specified VI.

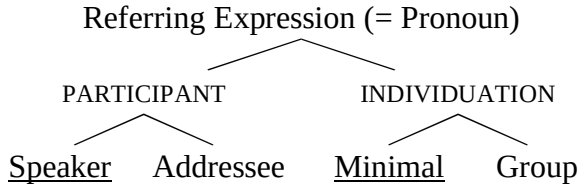
3. Markedness in feature geometries

- For some feature geometries, the 'unmarked' (or 'least marked') feature is always the least specified.

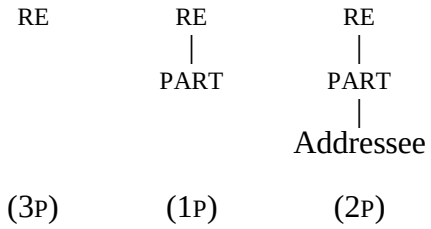
3.1 Harley & Ritter (2002): Person

- 3P is the absence of person features. It arises only as the default interpretation of a root node with no PART feature.

(2)



(3)



3.2 Cowper (2005): Number

- SG arises only as the default interpretation of a bare NUMBER node in contrast with other number features.

(4)

NUMBER
|
>1
|
>2

(5) a. 2-way contrast b. 3-way contrast

NUM	NUM	NUM	NUM	NUM
	|		|	|
	>1		>1	>1
				|
				>2
(SG)	(PL)	(SG)	(DU)	(PL)

3.3 Béjar & Hall (1999): Case

- NOM arises only as the default interpretation of a bare CASE node in contrast with other case features.

(6)

CASE (= Nominative)
Accusative OBLIQUE (= Genitive)
Locative THEMATIC (= Dative)
|
Instrumental

(7)

CASE	CASE	CASE
	|	|
	OBLIQUE	OBLIQUE
		|
		THEMATIC
(NOM)	(GEN)	(DAT)

4. An unsustainable prediction

IF:	unmarked = least specified
AND:	least specified = 'elsewhere' form
THEN:	unmarked = 'elsewhere' form

- The VI with the widest distribution (i.e., the 'elsewhere' form) should spell out unmarked features.
- This is true as a generalization, but there are exceptions.
- Sometimes the 'elsewhere' form does not spell out unmarked features; and the form that does spell out unmarked features does not participate in syncretism.

5. Exceptional patterns of syncretism

(8) English present tense verbs

	3P	2P	1P
SG	walk-**s**	walk	walk
PL	walk	walk	walk

(9) Orokaiva far past indicative of *hembu* 'walk'
(Baerman et. al. 2005: 26; Healey et. al. 1969: 40, 59, 62)

	3P	2P	1P
SG	hembu-**n**-a	hembu-a	hembu-a
PL	hembu-a	hembu-**w**-a	hembu-a

(10) Hindi masculine (class II) noun stems

	NOM	OBL	
SG	laḍk-**aa**	laḍk-e	‘boy’
PL	laḍk-e	laḍk-**õ**	

(11) Hindi masculine adjectives

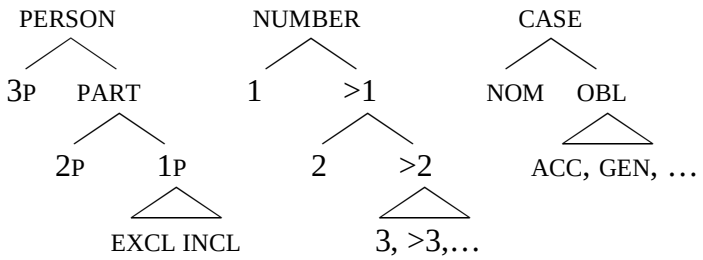
	NOM	OBL	
SG	baḍ-**aa**	baḍ-e	‘big’
PL	baḍ-e	baḍ-e	

- In each of these examples, the model predicts:
  - The syncretic forms should be the least specified because they have the widest distribution.
  - The forms that spell out 3P, SG, and NOM should be the least specified because they spell out unmarked features.
- Both forms cannot be underspecified. If they were, then they would be indistinguishable.
- In these examples, unmarked ≠ least specified.

6. Proposed analysis: Marking the unmarked

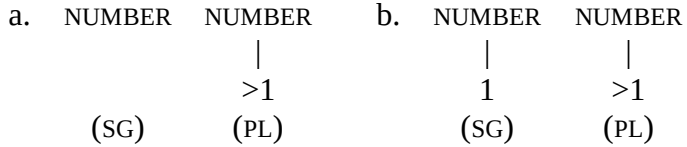
- Suppose each dimension consists of a series of binary branching nodes.

(12)

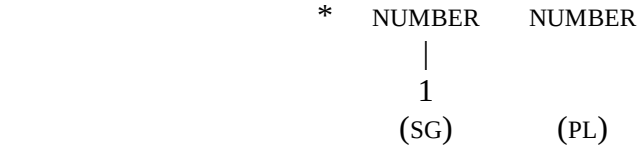


- Each branching node represents a degree of markedness; and each has a marked and unmarked dependent.
- Unmarked features have a structural definition: the dependent of a branching node with no further dependents.
- Marked features are those that branch; they have dependents.
- Unmarked features have a default status, but marked features do not.
- Contrast is established by specifying marked features first.
- In contrast to a marked feature, the underspecified node receives a default interpretation (=the unmarked feature).
- In the absence of contrast, the interpretation of a marked/branching node is inclusive; it includes all of its dependents.
- Since unmarked features have a default status they are redundant for the purpose of contrast.
- However, they are available as unique features in the geometry, so they can be activated redundantly *in addition to marked features.*
- The model predicts two well-formed systems of contrast: those that specify only marked features (13a), and those that specify both marked and unmarked features (13b).

(13) Two well-formed systems of contrast



(14) An ill-formed system of contrast



- (14) is ill-formed as a system of contrast among morphemes because marked features cannot be defaults.
- But (14) is a possible pattern of specification among vocabulary items within a system of contrast like (13b).
- If English has a system of contrast that includes both marked and unmarked features (15), then English VI's could be represented as in (16).

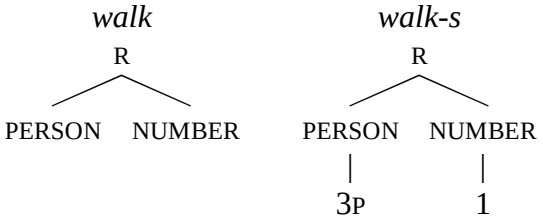
(15) Underlying contrasts available in English morphemes

a. PERSON: 3P; PERSON: PART; PERSON: PART → 1P

b. NUMBER: 1; NUMBER: >1

(3P) (2P) (1P) (SG) (PL)

(16) English VIs (present tense verbs)



(underspecified) (3P SG)

- If Hindi has a system of contrast that includes both marked and unmarked features (17), then Hindi VI's could be represented as in (18).
- In these representations: 'unmarked' ≠ 'underspecified'
- They correctly predict that the underspecified 'elsewhere' form will not spell out unmarked features.

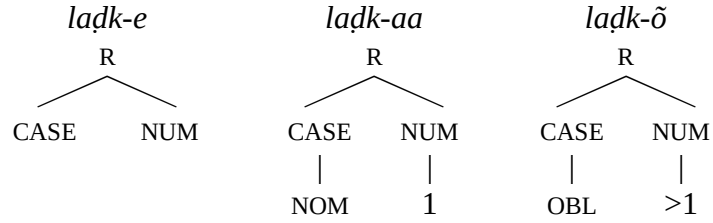
(17) Underlying contrasts available in Hindi morphemes

a. CASE: NOM; CASE: OBL

b. NUMBER: 1; NUMBER: >1

(NOM) (OBL) (SG) (PL)

(18) Hindi VIs (masculine class II noun stems)



(underspecified) (NOM SG) (OBL PL)

7. A New Prediction

- A VI that is uniquely specified for unmarked features should not participate in syncretism.
- This is because unmarked features have no dependents in the geometry; a form specified for an unmarked feature will not constitute a subset of any other representation.
- This is empirically verifiable and consistent with the examples examined here.

8. Conclusion

- The proposed analysis preserves the generalization: unmarked = underspecified (i.e., in most cases, because unmarked features are redundant for contrast).
- But it also allows: unmarked ≠ underspecified.
- This is necessary to account for exceptional patterns of syncretism in languages like English and Hindi.

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