

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

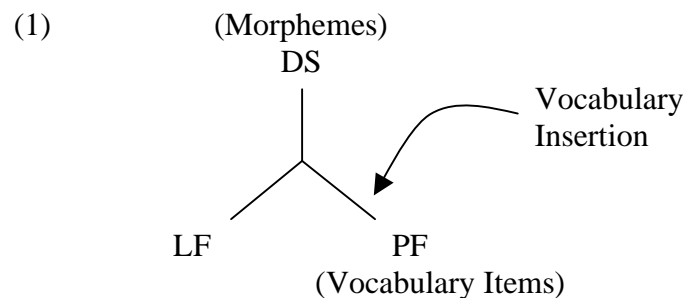
Paul Arsenault
 University of Toronto
paul.arsenault@utoronto.ca

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 unmarked 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.



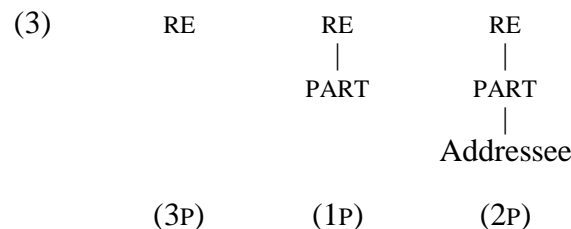
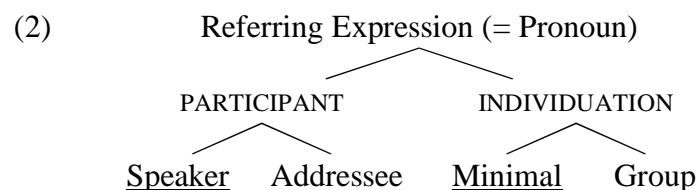
- The less specified the VI, the wider its distribution.
- The VI with the widest distribution (i.e., the ‘elsewhere’ form) is the least specified VI.

3. Markedness in feature geometries

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

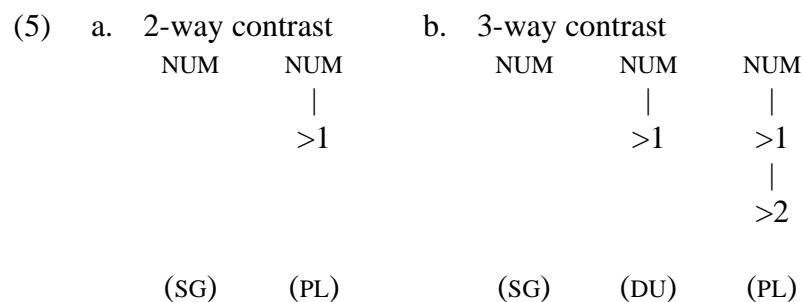
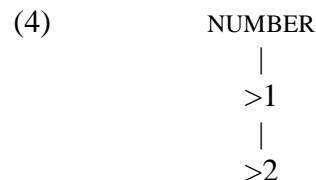
3.1 Harley & Ritter (2002): Person

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



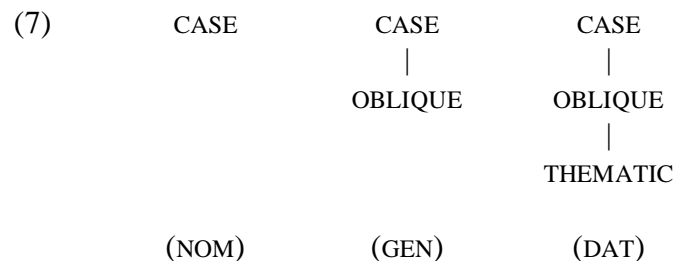
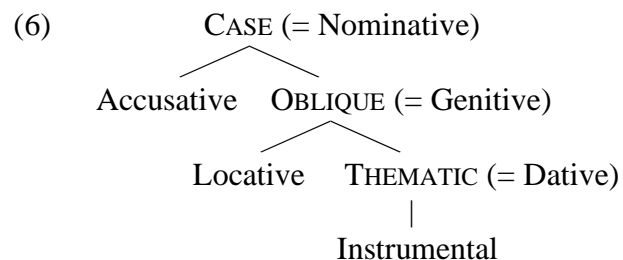
3.2 Cowper (2005): Number

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



3.3 Béjar & Hall (1999): Case

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



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	

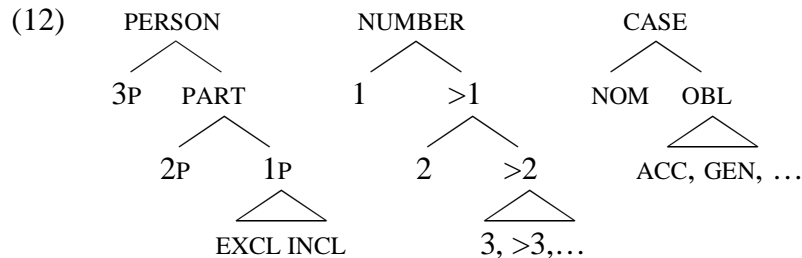
(11) Hindi masculine adjectives

	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.

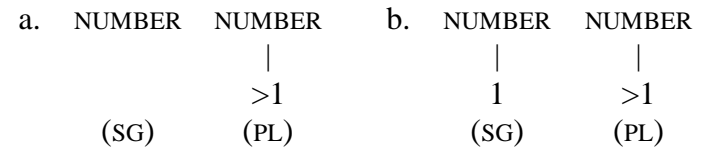
6. Proposed analysis: Marking the unmarked

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

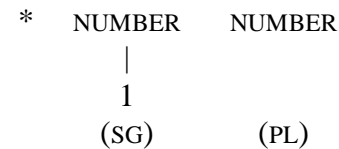


- Each branching node represents a degree of markedness; and each has a marked and unmarked dependent.
- Unmarked features have a structural definition: the dependent of a branching node with no further dependents.
- Marked features are those that branch; they have dependents.
- Unmarked features have 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

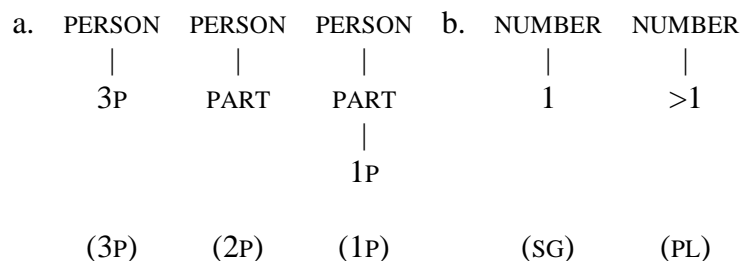


(14) An ill-formed system of contrast

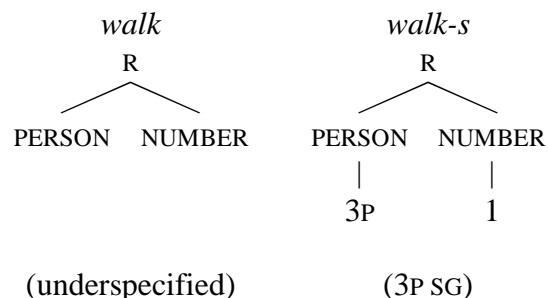


- (14) is ill-formed as a system of contrast among morphemes because marked features cannot be defaults.
- But (14) is a possible pattern of specification among vocabulary items within a system of contrast like (13b).
- If English has a system of contrast that includes both marked and unmarked features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

(15) Underlying contrasts available in English morphemes

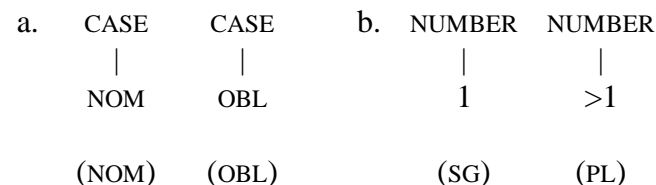


(16) English VIs (present tense verbs)

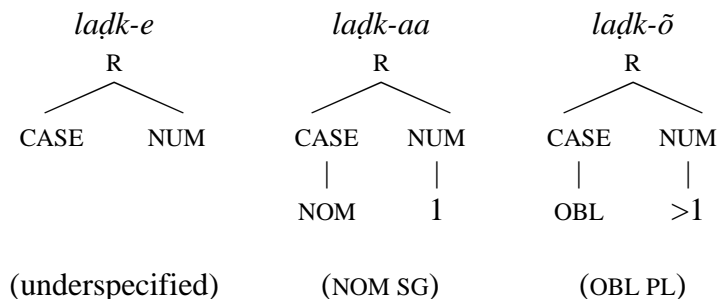


- If Hindi has a system of contrast that includes both marked and unmarked features (17), then Hindi VI's could be represented as in (18).
- In these representations: 'unmarked' ≠ 'underspecified'
- They correctly predict that the underspecified 'elsewhere' form will not spell out unmarked features.

(17) Underlying contrasts available in Hindi morphemes



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



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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