Morphological upstaging and 'markedness'

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Background: Even inflectional contrasts that are relevant to a language's grammar can be neutralized in the presence of some other feature value. This neutralization is often asymmetric: one dimension of meaning is preserved while another is lost. We refer to this as morphological **upstaging**: e.g., the lone 2nd person pronoun *you* in (some) English(es) shows person upstaging number, while both *we* and *you* illustrate participant person upstaging gender. In Distributed Morphology (DM; Halle & Marantz 1993 et seq.), such patterns involve competition between vocabulary items spelling out sets of features that are not (necessarily) in a superset–subset relation, which raises two questions: **1.** For a given pair of inflectional contrasts (e.g. NUMBER and GENDER), are patterns of upstaging cross-linguistically consistent? and **2.** Are these patterns, if they exist, illustrative of a key underlying principle in the synchronic grammar or are they better attributed to functional pressures or diachronic change?

Patterns of upstaging: Claims have been made about pairwise relationships between inflectional categories—e.g., Greenberg's (1966) Universals 32 and 45 give number precedence over gender in verb agreement and pronoun systems—but there has not been a systematic investigation of upstaging taking into account

(1)

		category preserved			
		PERS	NUM	CASE	GEND
category upstaged	PERS		1	0	0
	NUM	23		11	7
	CASE	20	18		7
	GEND	19	27	13	

multiple dimensions of contrast. We report on a new cross-linguistic survey of syncretisms in nominal paradigms (so far pronouns and demonstratives), which builds on and extends the survey in Bliss & Ritter (2009). The distribution of upstaging patterns in 71 languages examined so far is summarized in (1). Each cell shows the number of languages in which the relevant neutralization is found. While the directionality of upstaging is not categorical, there are distinct asymmetries: e.g., NUMBER upstages GENDER in 27 languages, while GENDER upstages NUMBER in only 7.

Explaining upstaging: Upstaging is a systematic pattern of syncretism that neutralizes a distinction present elsewhere in the same language—a morphosyntactic counterpart of contextual neutralization in phonology. In realizational theories such as DM, syncretism can result either from underspecification or from the application of language-specific morphological rules (Impoverishment in DM). Many authors have linked syncretism to the co-occurrence of multiple 'marked' feature values (Jakobson 1939; Brøndal 1940; Greenberg 1966), but what it means for a feature value to be marked has remained in dispute, as has the question of whether the same features are marked in different languages. These theoretical tools seek to explain why syncretism happens where it does, but cannot account for the *direction* of neutralization.

We propose that the mechanism underlying upstaging is indeed underspecification of competing realization rules, but that languages differ in which contrastive feature values are syntactically encoded (Cowper & Hall 2017), and that competition may be constrained by a preference for realizing features with semantic content. This preference predicts, e.g., the upstaging of (arbitrary) GENDER by NUMBER, and of (structural) CASE by ɸ-features. What this does not predict is what should happen when both features are contentful—why, in other words, does PERSON resist upstaging more strongly than number? We suggest that this may be sensitive to finer grained distinctions in the structural position realized by demonstratives vs. pronouns.

Though there is evident functional utility in realizing interpretable features, our claim is that this can be productively understood as a formal phenomenon tied to the established metafeature [Interpretable] (Chomsky 1995). We avoid predicting, e.g., that the presence of lexical items expressing a given contrast will obviate its realization in the inflectional system.