

An I-language View of Morphological 'Exceptionality': Comments on Corbett's Paper

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I Introduction

Corbett starts from what he calls “the notion of ‘canonical’ inflection,” corresponding closely to an ideal “one form — one meaning” pattern with respect to the roots and formal markers found in inflected words. He discusses some of the myriad ways in which actual inflectional paradigms are found to deviate from this simple schema, and provides a number of important and thought-provoking examples.

Many linguists have felt that something like this ‘canonical’ inflection must in some way characterize morphological structure in general. Some might see this as an ideal form underlying the apparent complexity of surface shapes, as in Lounsbury’s (1953) notion of an idealized “agglutinating analog,” while others (such as the practitioners of “Natural Morphology”) regard it as a fundamental constraint on linguistic structure. Examples such as Corbett’s make it clear that any claim to the effect that inflectional paradigms are “basically” regular must at a minimum be carefully hedged to allow for all sorts of deviation from regularity in practice.

I address here two consequences that follow from observations such as those in Corbett’s paper. I first note, in section 2, that exceptionality in inflectional morphology finds its importance not directly in terms of comparisons between surface forms, but rather in the grammar that underlies them: in I-language rather than E-language, to put the matter in Chomsky’s terms (cf. Anderson & Lightfoot 2002). In section 3 I then suggest that the range of exceptionality referred to in Corbett’s discussion argues that morphological theory, *per se*, has no place for the notion of such an ideal structural type. To the extent much (indeed, most) actual inflectional structure matches it, the explanation is to be found outside of the theory of word structure itself, in areas such as the patterns of diachronic change that lead to observed synchronic systems.

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2 The Locus of Exceptionality

Corbett discusses ways in which observed inflectional paradigms can deviate from the patten of canonical inflection, including the traditional notions of *suppletion*, *syncretism*, *overdifferentiation*, and *deponency*. He discusses these notions, as is quite standard in traditional grammar, in terms of surface word forms: thus, syncretism is described as “instances in which we have a single form which realizes more than one morphosyntactic specification.”

This approach, however, leads to a certain amount of indeterminacy. For instance, how do we know in a given case, whether we are dealing with “overdifferentiation” in one subset of the lexicon of a language as opposed to “syncretism” in a complementary subset? Is it the case that some Maltese nouns are overdifferentiated for number, or rather that the others (the great majority) show syncretism of the dual and plural? How could we differentiate these accounts, and does it actually matter that we do so? Simply observing that nouns with a distinct dual constitute a small minority makes the difference a matter of mere numbers and seems to trivialize the issue, but it is hard to see how we can improve on that so long as our attention is confined to patterns in surface forms. If the difference between syncretism and overdifferentiation is genuinely significant, this must be because they correspond to distinct mechanisms in the grammar of a language. In every case, the observation of a surface pattern deviating from the canonical one only raises the question of what lies behind it, rather than serving as a (self-confirming) diagnosis of the nature of the exceptionality.

2.1 Identifying True Suppletion

For example, “suppletion” cannot be identified in any significant sense as mere non-identity of the lexical bases of two (or more) morphosyntactically distinct forms within a paradigm. In some instances, quite considerable differences in the shape of the base among paradigmatically related forms may follow directly from the phonological regularities of the language. For instance, *yhden*, the genitive form of the Finnish numeral ‘one’, differs substantially from the nominative *yksi*. These differences follow from the phonology of Finnish, however, given a basic stem such as /ükte/. In the nominative, /e/ is raised to [i] in final position, which results in spirantization of the /t/ to [s]. In the genitive, the addition of the regular ending /n/ prevents the stem-final vowel from raising. It also closes the second syllable, resulting in consonant gradation of the stem /t/ to /d/, and concomitant dissimilation of continuance which causes the /k/ of the stem to be realized as [h]. Surely we should not speak of suppletion here, despite the disparity of stem shape: true suppletion corresponds to the case in which an alternation in form is lexically idiosyncratic, and thus must be represented by distinct memorized forms, rather than mere difference in the surface form of the base.

We often proceed as if we could identify genuine cases of suppletion in terms of the distance between variants of the base, and the phonological naturalness of their connection. Sometimes, though, quite minor alternations in shape can have the lexical character that leads us to call them suppletive. An example of this is furnished by the

Surmiran form of Rumantsch. Here, as in many other Romance languages, verbal endings differ as to whether or not they bear stress, and the vowels of the stem may change in limited ways depending on whether a form takes stress on the stem or on the ending. For instance, in the paradigm of *cantar* ‘to sing’ we find *cantas* [ˈkantəs] ‘sing (2sg)’ alternating with *cantagn* [kənˈtəŋ] ‘sing (1pl)’. Given that Surmiran only has the vowels [i,ə,u] in unstressed syllables, as opposed to a full set of seven vowels (short and long) plus several diphthongs in stressed syllables, it seems that this alteration must be a purely phonological matter of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables. In some instances, such as the verb *eir* ‘to go’, we certainly find suppletion: the alternation of *vast* [vast] ‘go (2sg)’ with *giagn* [jəŋ] ‘go (1pl)’ is unconnected with any general phonological rule(s). Surely the alternation in forms of *cantar* is phonological, though.

Closer examination shows that this is not correct. As a consequence of wholesale re-structuring of vocalic patterns in individual verbs, there is no longer a predictable correspondence between stressed and unstressed vowels. For any one of the three possible unstressed vowels, there are seven or eight possible corresponding stressed vowels (or diphthongs). This would hardly be unusual, if the correspondence were unique in the other direction, but that is not the case. In fact, there is *no* stressed vowel whose unstressed correspondent is unique; and some of the stressed vowels (e.g., [a] and [o]) can correspond to any one of the unstressed vowels, depending on the lexical identity of the verb in question. Some of these patterns are commoner than others, but not at all to the extent that the simple and phonologically natural alternations can be derived by rule. Although there is no doubt that these alternations originated historically in a straightforward phonological rule reducing vowels in unstressed syllables, the pattern in the language today is arguably such that every verb must have its two alternants (stem-stressed *vs.* desinential-stressed) indicated in its lexical entry: suppletion by definition, if we think of morphology in terms of grammars.

2.2 Sources of Syncretism in Grammar

If we see syncretism pre-systematically as the coincidence in a single surface form of multiple morphosyntactic possibilities, as Corbett’s definition (quoted above) suggests, then we must realize that this can have several different sources in the grammar of a language.

In some instances, the overlap of multiple morphosyntactically distinct specifications in a single surface form is surely a matter of simple homophony, not to be confused with syncretism. In Icelandic, for example, the genitive singular of strong nouns is marked either with *-s* or with *-ar*. The nominative (and in some cases, accusative) plural of strong masculine and feminine nouns is marked with *-ar*, *-ir*, *-ur* or *-r* (of which this last may disappear phonetically after stem-final *r* or assimilate to a preceding sonorant). There are some principles governing the distribution of each of these sets of alternants, but they are quite independent of one another. In particular, while some nouns do show *-ar* both in the genitive singular and the nominative plural (e.g., *kerling* ‘old woman’), there is no reason to treat this as a systematic syncretism, because many others show *-ar* only on one for the other (e.g., *hlutur* ‘thing’, gsg. *hlu-*

tar, npl. *hlutir*; *hestur* ‘horse’, gsg. *hests*, npl. *bestar*). The grammar, that is, establishes no systematic connection between nouns with a genitive in *-ar* and those with an identical nominative(/accusative) plural. The two categories simply have markers that may accidentally coincide, leading to word forms that are homophonous and not syncretic.

In other cases, surface identity of morphosyntactically distinct forms is a result of the phonology. For example, a substantial subset of the “irregular” verbs of English (i.e., those that do not form their past and past participle by adding /d/) involve the addition of a very similar ending, /t/, at an earlier level of the lexical phonology (see Anderson 1973 for some discussion), as in the (now somewhat archaic) *burn/burnt*, *learn/learnt*. As opposed to the ‘regular’ ending /d/, this /t/ has the effect of devoicing a preceding voiced fricative and shortening the vowel of the stem, as in *leave/left*, *lose/lost*, and other verbs. The vowel-shortening effect, regular before syllable-final clusters at this level, can occur by itself (*creep/crept*, *mean/meant*, *deal/dealt*). When the stem ends in /t/, the cluster is simplified, but not before triggering vowel shortening: *bite/bit*, *meet/met*. For stems ending in /d/, the same cluster reduction occurs (without regressive assimilation of [Voice]), again with vowel shortening: *lead/led*, *slide/slid*.

This cluster of phonological effects is quite regular and characteristic of the appropriate level of the phonology. What is interesting is the consequence of adding this /t/ to stems ending in a dental stop and containing a basic short vowel. In such forms (e.g. *set/set*, *fit/fit*; *rid/rid*, *wed/wed*) the vowel shortening has no visible effect (since the vowel is already short), and the reduction of the final stop cluster results in the complete loss of any surface reflex of the ending. The consequence is a phonologically derived homophony of the present and past forms, but surely not a morphologically governed syncretism.

Somewhat similar consequences can follow from the operation of morphological regularities that are sensitive to phonological form. It is of course well known that the regular plural and possessive forms of English nouns are generally identical phonologically: both *boys* and *boys’* are pronounced [bojz]. This is probably a matter of simple homophony, though the fact that essentially *all* productive inflection in English involves the two phonological forms /z/ and /d/, each adjoined (not simply concatenated) at the right edge of the word, suggests that some more general principle may be at work.

What is somewhat more interesting is the fact that the possessive form of a word ending in the regular plural is also homophonous with the simple plural and possessive: *boys’* is also phonetically [bojz], not the expected *[bojzəz]. This cannot be an instance of syncretism, because exactly where the plural of a noun is formed in some way other than with /z/, the possessive plural is distinct: *children’s*, *women’s*. Furthermore, the same homophony is found (for at least some speakers, and perhaps more manuals of English usage) with a class of proper names ending in /z/: *Jones’ theory*. Consider also that for some speakers, the presence of the 3rd person singular /z/ also blocks the overt expression of the possessive: *The girl Harry adores’ long hair [is actually a wig]* (cf. Zwicky 1987). The regularity is thus not the morphologically conditioned one “singular and plural possessive are identical” that the syncretism analysis predicts.

There are various ways to describe these facts (see Anderson 2005, pp. 89-94 for some discussion). We might say, for instance, that the plural, possessive and 3sg present

/z/'s are adjoined to the word with which they appear, and the phonology then reduces a pair of identical adjoined elements to a single instance. Or perhaps the possessive rule adjoins /z/ *unless* its host already ends in an adjoined /z/. Or perhaps, within an Optimality-theoretic framework, the possessive rule simply says: the last word of a DP with the property [Poss] must end in adjoined /z/ (a condition satisfied without change if the host word already contains a /z/). On any of these analyses, we also have to say that for (style books and) speakers who prefer *Jones' theory*, the proper names in question contain a semantically vacuous and purely formal adjoined /z/.

The differences among these accounts, while undoubtedly significant, do not matter to the present point. On any one of them, the homophony of the regular plural and its possessive form follows not from a rule of syncretism, but rather from the morphophonology of the rule of phrasal inflection that marks the possessive form.

It is the existence of these various circumstances that can give rise to surface identity among morphosyntactically distinct forms that heightens the significance of examples of genuine syncretisms, such as the paradigm of *človek* 'man, person' in Slovene discussed by Corbett. Here the fact that the genitive and locative dual forms are built in the same way as the corresponding plurals, while the remaining forms of the dual are built on the singular stem, shows that the morphological rule of syncretism cited by Corbett ("Slovene nouns always have the genitive [and locative] dual syncretic with the genitive [and locative] plural") accurately captures the generalization at work. Accidental homophony or phonologically derived neutralization are not serious candidates in such a case, which shows that morphological structure must countenance such "rules of referral" (as some have called them).

I do not by any means intend to suggest that Corbett is unaware of the differences I have pointed to here. Indeed, one finds much in work of his and his colleagues referred to in the paper under discussion that is of great importance for making exactly these distinctions. I mean only to emphasize that in any discussion of "non-canonical" patterns in inflectional morphology, it is essential to keep one's focus on just where in the grammar a given (apparently) exceptional pattern has its source, and not only on the surface forms that realize it. Exceptionality in morphology does not wear its diagnosis on its sleeve.

3 The Significance of Exceptionality for Morphological Theory

Returning to the conceptual framework of Corbett's paper, we can ask what status should be accorded to the notion of "canonical inflection" in terms of which exceptionality is defined. In line with the remarks of the previous section, I suggest that if this notion has systematic status, it should be in terms of the architecture of a grammar, and not directly in terms of patterns among surface forms.

In linguistic theory it has been common to posit an innate structural preference for paradigmatic relations of the sort Corbett designates as "canonical," under a variety of names: Uniform Exponence, Paradigm Coherence or Uniformity, Output-Output

Correspondence, Natural Morphology, etc. For such a principle to have the status of a constraint on grammars represented in Universal Grammar, it ought to have the properties of what Kiparsky (2007) calls “true universals,” and not simply those of “typological generalizations.” Corbett, however, demonstrates here for us that there is actually no limit in principle to the range of exceptions that languages may display to such a pattern; and thus, that it cannot constitute the kind of characterization of the human language capacity that is the business of Universal Grammar. Along similar lines, Garrett (2007) demonstrates that an independent constraint on non-uniform paradigms does not serve as a mechanism in historical change (driving instances of paradigmatic leveling); rather, the effect is in the opposite direction, with observed instances of “leveling” following from independent mechanisms of change (paradigm extension).

These observations are in line with evidence accumulating in a variety of areas that many observed typological regularities are to be attributed not to the structure of Universal Grammar, but to logically quite separate external sources such as linguistic change or processing preferences. Such arguments have been made for phonology, for example, by Blevins (2004); in syntax, by Newmeyer (2006), and for morphology in Anderson 2004. Corbett’s discussion reinforces this conclusion by demonstrating the extent to which any such regularities of word structure are subject to pervasive exceptions of fundamental sorts.

Whatever the architecture of morphological theory, it is quite unlikely that a notion such as Corbett’s canonical inflection has systematic status within it. The study of surface patterns manifested in E-languages, of course, provides vital evidence about the nature of language, but they are not themselves the *explananda* of grammatical theory. It is, rather, the structure of I-language objects (grammars) that we seek to account for.

Of course, we are left here (as in other areas of grammar) with the problem of how to identify genuine constraints on the human cognitive capacity for language, constraints that are true universals and thus appropriate for incorporation into the theory of synchronic grammars. There is little doubt that such constraints exist, but the primary source of evidence for proposals in this area has been the identification of widespread patterns — typological generalizations, in Kiparsky’s formulation. Once we recognize that these are actually due, at least in a great many cases, to factors other than the structure of UG, our search for an appropriate theory of grammar becomes much harder — but no less fundamental.

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