
Sliding scales in inflection

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The morphological structure of inflectional paradigms can be thought of as aligning with the feature structure it realizes, or as operating along independent ‘morphomic’ principles. A third possibility – little studied because rarely encountered – is for the two to display parallel structure without a consistent mapping between them. In effect, the morphological paradigm is iconic of the feature structure even in the absence of a reliable form-function relationship. A striking example of this comes from the Yuman language Hualapai (Watahomigie et al. 2001). Verbs have up to four number forms that mark a mixture of subject, object and event number that I interpret as four values of morphosemantic number, e.g. SINGULAR **dagwan** ‘one person beats up (somebody)’, PAUCAL **dagwanj** ‘a few people beat up (somebody)’, PLURAL **dadgwan** ‘many people beat up (somebody)’, GREATER PLURAL **dadgwanj** ‘many beat up (many people)’. Singular forms are unmarked, while the non-singular forms are built up using suffixes, prefixes and stem lengthening, varying in shape and combinatorial properties across several inflection classes. The striking property of this system is that no fixed number value can be assigned to any of the morphological markers. For example, the contrast of lengthened stem vs. lengthened+suffixed stem marks paucal versus plural in the case of the verb ‘dig’ (**hwa:l** ~ **hwa:l-j**), but plural versus greater plural in the case of ‘tie’ (**gilgyo:** ~ **gilgyo:-j**). But one can always ascertain the *relative* number value of two forms within a paradigm. I model this as two independent but parallel hierarchies: (i) the morphosemantic number values, and (ii) the morphological forms, which express relative but not absolute quantification. The mapping between the two takes the form of a sliding scale, maintaining the relative order of both components while still allowing for a many-to-many mapping.

References: • Watahomigie, L., J. Bender, P. Watahomigie Sr. & A. Yamamoto (2001): Hualapai Reference Grammar. ELPR Publications.