

# Syncretism and Case Underspecification in Polish Noun Paradigms

## 1. Introduction

In my talk I will present an analysis of Polish nominal inflection which focuses on case syncretism within noun paradigms. Syncretism, i.e. homophony among inflectional forms, is a notorious problem in inflectional morphology because of the mismatch between morphosyntactic distinctions, as required by syntax, and the absence of any corresponding distinctions in phonological form.

I will show that most syncretisms can be resolved when Polish noun forms are assumed to be underspecified with respect to their morphosyntactic features. Central to the analysis is the idea that fully specified syntactic positions are to be realized by underspecified word forms according to their specificity. The analysis thus strongly supports theories which adopt (a version of) the specificity principle such as *Distributed Morphology* (*DM*, cf. e.g. Noyer 1997).

## 2. State of the Art

Recent approaches to syncretism in Slavic noun inflection, e.g. Corbett/Fraser (1993) and Fraser/Corbett (1995) on Russian, make extensive use of rules of referral (Zwicky 1985, Stump 2001). In its simplest form, a rule of referral states that the content of two or more cells within a paradigm has to be identical. As such, rules of referral are a rather powerful device of accounting for syncretism, and accordingly, their explanatory force has sometimes been called into question (cf. e.g. Wunderlich 1996, Bobaljik 2002).

In a different approach (*DM*), Halle (1994) adopts disjunctive rules to capture case syncretisms within Russian noun paradigms. However, these rules just relate the same affix to different morphosyntactic feature sets, and thus do not resolve homophony among inflectional forms.

## 3. Proposal

In contrast, the analysis I am going to propose does not employ rules of referral in explaining the occurrence of syncretisms, nor does it make use of disjunctive rules. Rather, a syncretism is predicted to occur whenever a feature distinction, as required by syntax, is not reflected in the morphological feature specification of the word form within the paradigm (an idea already implicit in Jakobson 1936; see also Lumsden 1992). Following Bierwisch (1967), Blevins (1995) and Wiese (1999), I will make three central assumptions: (i) case features are decomposed into more primitive features; (ii) forms of a paradigm are (under)specified with respect to those primitive features; (iii) only the most specific form of a paradigm may realize a syntactic position compatible with it.

For example, nominative, accusative and genitive case are decomposed into the feature sets {+central, -objective, -oblique}, {+central, +objective, -oblique}, and {+central, +objective, +oblique}, respectively. To account for the nominative-accusative syncretism found with nonanimate masculine nouns such as *liść* ('leaf'), the relevant form will be (under)specified as {+central, -oblique} and thus compatible with both syntactic positions. In the same way, the accusative-genitive syncretism found with human masculine nouns such as *przyjaciół* ('friend') will be resolved by (under)specifying the relevant form as {+central, +objective}.

Moreover, I will argue that the analysis can be further constrained by using only positively specified features. Thus, each syncretism accounted for by underspecification will be an instance of neutralization, i.e. deletion of an otherwise possible positively specified feature. Furthermore, I will discuss different versions of the specificity principle showing that a restrictive form of it will be sufficient for my analysis and that in particular no reference has to be made to additional feature hierarchies in order to compute the most specific feature specification.

## 4. Outlook

Last, not least, the analysis to be proposed for Polish can be generalized to Russian and Serbo-Croatian. In particular, no additional assumptions are necessary to account for those syncretisms that are induced by semantic categories like animacy and/or humanity and that are not equally distributed within the three languages.

#### 4. References

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