Partitioning the nominal domain: the convergence of morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics

Rose-Marie Déchaine
University of British Columbia

Nominal inflection — which typically includes case, person, number, and gender — is first and foremost a mechanism for partitioning nominal expressions into (morphological) form-classes. There is an emerging consensus that such form-classes associate in a regular fashion with a syntactic spine that is deployed in essentially the same way in all human languages. This research program — which focuses on the morphology-syntax interface — is yielding promising results, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, it has generated a number of competing hypotheses concerning how form-classes map onto the syntactic spine. Empirically, it has lead to the (re-)discovery of numerous nominal inflectional paradigms that, in one way or another, pose a problem for formal analysis. The thorniest problem is when the same form-class appears in different positions in the spine. In particular, numerous case studies develop analyses that account for why number and gender seem to map onto different syntactic positions, both within and across languages. This morphology-syntax mapping in turn has consequences for the syntax-semantics mapping, as the analyses that allow non-uniform mapping of features also claim — implicitly or explicitly — that these mapping differences have semantic consequences. While some of these construals fall within the realm of canonical semantics, many do not. In particular, a subset of these construals are evaluative — often relating to size (diminutive, augmentative), affect (pejorative, ameliorative), or intention (known or unknown to speaker). Evaluatives are notoriously sensitive to context-of-use, as they indicate the speaker’s (qua origo) point-of-view of the referent. In this way, nominal inflectional features, through primarily formal in nature, acquire dimensions of meaning that go well beyond truth-conditional semantics, and force us to examine context-of-use (pragmatics) more carefully.

These questions are explored on the basis of data from Algonquian and Bantu languages, with a focus on Plains Cree and Shona respectively. In Plains Cree, animacy cross-cuts with number and obviation contrasts in ways that are, at first glance, mysterious. However, once context-of-use is taken into account, then the deployment of these forms can be shown to be an emergent property that reflects the convergence of morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In Shona, noun-class morphology likewise operates across multiple dimensions, including nominal classification in the narrow sense (where it shows a subtle count/mass partition), nominal derivation, evaluative derivation and concordial agreement. As in Plains Cree, the deployment of Shona classificatory morphology is an emergent property that reflects the convergence of morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. More generally, the take-home message is that, in all human languages, nominal classificatory morphology is syntactically multi-functional, semantically type-flexible, and pragmatically versatile.