

The Morphosyntax of Gender and Number: Converging and Crossing

Abstract

The gender system of a language is usually determined by inspecting the agreement patterns of its singular nouns. For example, in Amharic, one set of singular nouns appears with the definite determiner *-u*, while the complement of that set appears with the definite determiner *-wa*. Therefore, Amharic has two genders: one with *-u* and one with *-wa*. However, plural nouns do not always make the same cut, i.e., they do not always show the same gender distinctions as singular nouns. For example, in Amharic, all plural nouns appear with *-u*, regardless of which definite determiner they appear with in the singular. This talk aims to investigate two particular types of gender-number relationships from the perspective of Distributed Morphology: convergent gender-number systems and crossed gender-number systems. Both types turn out to have implications for morphological theory, especially on how to draw the line between a morphological phenomenon and a syntactic phenomenon.

A language is convergent when it makes fewer gender distinctions in the plural than in the singular, like Amharic definite determiners. Gender-number convergence often holds across multiple paradigms of a language (Bobaljik 2002, Harley 2008), and I discuss how to distinguish between a morphological analysis of this effect (i.e., as a metasyncretism) and a syntactic analysis (i.e., as a difference in feature bundles). The underspecificational approach to syncretisms in DM also leads to predictions about possible types of convergent systems, and I show that these predictions are confirmed through case studies of three convergent languages: Coptic, Maay and Tamil. In a crossed language, some nouns (appear to) change gender from the singular to the plural, e.g., masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural. I argue that crossed systems are heterogeneous; some are due to morphological idiosyncrasy (e.g., Hebrew), some are due to syntactic properties (e.g., Somali) and some are neither morphological nor syntactic but due to a separate phenomenon entirely (e.g., Romanian). The talk concludes with brief discussion of the accuracy of, and potential explanations for, Greenberg's (1966) Universal 37 that no language makes more gender distinctions in the plural than they do in the singular.