

Bobaljik 2008

0. Synopsis

- This paper investigates inventories of person marking cross-linguistically
- Certain logically possible distinctions are never drawn in morpheme inventories,.
- Proposal: a universal inventory of features delimits the range of possible “persons” in language

1. Introduction

- Two big questions about universals in language
 - Are there absolute (exceptionless) universals? (As opposed to statistical trends)
 - If there are, do they reflect the genetic endowment for language (the **formalist** position) or do they instead "emerge from cross-cultural tendencies in speech act settings (the **functionalist** position)"
- In this paper, Bobaljik investigates **three case studies** concerning what are argued to be absolute morphological universals.
 - All three cases involve well-formed/plausible morphological contrasts that never occur
 - Claim: there are universal constraints on possible morphemes: a Universal Feature Inventory (supports formalist position).
- All three case studies concern contrasts in the domain of person marking (agreement, clitics and pronouns).
- The person domain here is understood in terms of 7 "meta-persons" (Sokolovskaja 1980):

(4)	<i>The seven meta-persons</i>
1+2	speaker(s) and hearer(s); no “others”
1+2+3	speaker(s), hearer(s), and other(s)
1	speaker(s) only
1+3	speaker(s) and other(s); hearer(s) excluded
2	hearer(s) only
2+3	hearer(s) and other(s)
3	other(s) only

- Despite possibility of 7-way contrast, certain contrasts are never attested. In other words, a 3-way feature system [1,2,3] **overgenerates**
 - Maximal number of contrasts is 4 (see (5b))
 - In languages lacking inclusive/exclusive distinction, the first 4 meta contrasts are subsumed under 1.pl we

(5)

a. Possible	b. Attested	c. Binary
1+2	“inclusive”	[+spk +hr]
1+2+3		
1	“exclusive”	[+spk, −hr]
1+3		
2	“second person”	[−spk, +hr]
2+3		
3	“third person”	[−spk, −hr]

- The three proposed universals are stated in (6)

(6) **Person universals**

a. **As restrictions on contrasts**

U1 No language distinguishes [1+1] from [1+3].

U2 No language distinguishes [2+2] from [2+3].

U3 No language distinguishes among [1+1+2], [1+2+2] and [1+2+3].

b. **As restrictions on forms**

U1 No language has a special morpheme for (true) [1 PL].

U2 No language has a special morpheme for (true) [2 PL].

U3 No language has a special morpheme for ‘comprehensive’ person [1+2+3].

- What is required, to limit the range of attested contrasts, is a two feature system instead of three: [+/-speaker] and [+/- hearer] (or equivalent). No “third person” feature.
 - Permits maximum 4-way contrast
 - Excludes exactly the unattested distinctions

2. Missing persons

- Preliminary remark: generalizations here refer to ‘atomic’ person markers, not morphologically complex (see discussion p. 209). In other words, the proposed

restrictions are restrictions on **possible morphemes** as opposed to possible morpheme combinations.

- Also excluded: number marking

2.1 Universal 1: no [1+1]

(7) *Universal 1*

- No language distinguishes [1+1] from [1+3].
- No language has a special morpheme for (true) [1 PL].

- "No language has a special "chorus we", that is, a person marker used solely for a plurality of speakers, speaking together, and distinct from any of the other first person plurals...." (p. 210)
- Contexts where such a pronoun would be natural:
 - Greek drama
 - Sporting event ("We are the champions")
 - Religious rituals (group prayer)
- A related issue: can there be a true 1.pl.
 - "plural, for the first person, normally means an **associative** or **group** plural, rather than a multiplicity of individuals sharing the property [speaker]" [bold added] (p. 210)
 - We see this even in languages that permit the general plural to combine with 1st person (unlike English)
 - U1 is partially equivalent to saying [pl] combined with [1] can only be associative

(8)	Mandarin		Sierra Popoluca	
	SG.	PL.	SG.	PL.
[1]	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>wǒ-men</i>	<i>ǎč</i>	<i>ǎč-tʰam</i>
[2]	<i>nǐ</i>	<i>nǐ-men</i>	<i>míč</i>	<i>míč-tʰam</i>
[3]	<i>tā</i>	<i>tā-men</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>héʔ-yah</i>
noun:	<i>xuésheng</i>	<i>xuésheng-men</i>	<i>wó:ñ-tʰam</i>	
	'student'	'student-PL'	'little.girl-PL'	

2.2 Universal 2: no [2] exclusive

(9) *Universal 2*

- a. No language distinguishes [2+2] from [2+3].
- b. No language has a special morpheme for (true) [2 PL].

- Illustration of a putative counterexample: Abkhaz seems to have contrast between 2nd person inclusive/general vs exclusive.
 - But it isn't clear that inclusive vs exclusive is really what is going on
 - Alternative characterization: you vs you(without me) NOT you vs. you(witout 3)
 - Exclusive form is not atomic, the *-t* also occurs in demonstratives

(10) *Abkhaz – plural pronouns*

	Inclusive/general	Exclusive
1 PL	<i>ħa(rà)</i>	<i>ħart</i>
2 PL	<i>š^oa(rà)</i>	<i>š^oart</i>
3 PL	<i>darà</i>	

- Other potential counter-examples discussed and set aside (pp 213-215): special use of reflexive *zibun* in Japanese; possible 'present' vs 'absent' contrast in Palaung; multiplicity of person values in ASL

2.3 Universal 3: [1+2] dual ('just you and me')(11) *Universal 3*

- a. No language distinguishes among [1+1+2], [1+2+2] and [1+2+3].
- b. No language has a special morpheme for the comprehensive person [1+2+3].

- Related to U2, U3 maintains that the distinction ruled out by U2 is not made among the inclusive pronouns. No language distinguishes between an inclusive "speaker and multiple hearers" versus "speaker, hearer(s) and at least one non-participant"
- Illustration of a putative counterexample: Ilocano seems to have contrast between dual [1+2] inclusive *ta* and plural [1+2+3] inclusive *tayo* (12).
 - But there is no other evidence for [dual] in the system
 - A proposed alternative is a two-way number contrast [minimal] vs [augmented] (13), where [minimal] denotes the minimal number of individuals required to satisfy the basic meaning of the pronoun.

- Under this analysis, the person dimension of the system makes just the 4 expected distinctions. A contrast b/w [1+2] vs [1+2+3] is not invoked.

(12) *Ilocano enclitic pronouns* (traditional analysis, see also Rubino 2000)

	Singular	Dual	Plural
1 incl	*	<i>ta</i>	<i>tayo</i>
1 excl	<i>co</i>	<i>mi</i>	
2	<i>mo</i>	<i>yo</i>	
3	<i>na</i>	<i>da</i>	

(13) *Minimal–augmented analysis* (Thomas 1955, Conklin 1962, Corbett 2000, Rubino 2005)

	Minimal	Augmented
+sp,+hr	<i>ta</i>	<i>tayo</i>
+sp	<i>co</i>	<i>mi</i>
+hr	<i>mo</i>	<i>yo</i>
–sp,–hr	<i>na</i>	<i>da</i>

- Similar putative counterexamples are discussed and set aside (pp 218-221)

3. Explaining absences

- A two feature system [+/-speaker], [+/-hearer], with no feature corresponding to "other" or 3, predicts exactly the four attested contrasts in person systems, cross-linguistically.

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"...the binary system allows for the expression of all and only the attested distinctions of person. The unattested distinctions are never grammaticalized because the grammatical apparatus for expressing them does not exist within UG." (p.221)

- In the absence of alternative explanations for person inventory restrictions, Bobaljik argues that this constitutes an argument that UG imposes formal constraints on possible languages.
- But why would UG have this feature system and not others?
- Functionalist discussions claim to offer domain-general principles that would account for the restrictions. "...if the universals...follow from general cognitive properties, independent of language, then hard-wiring them into the feature system may be superfluous (p. 221-222).
- Two general types of functionalist explanations
 - Functional load: the unattested distinctions aren't impossible, but they would bear such a small **functional load** that they would never be grammaticalized
 - Incoherent cognitive representation of discourse due to **extended egocentricity**: the unattested distinctions are indeed impossible "due to general properties of the cognitive representation of discourse.
 - additional distinctions would be unusable, similar to [+high, +low] in phonology

3.1 Functional load

- Cysouw 2003 (functionalist stance): the conversational settings in which categories like 1+1 or 2+1 would be attested are extremely marked, therefore these feature combinations are not grammaticalized.

- Bobaljik's response:
 - no data supports the claim that these contexts are rare; preliminary analysis of 2.pl *vosotros* in Spanish corpus suggests otherwise (found more multiple hearer contexts than hearer+other contexts)
 - no independent threshold of grammaticalizability provided. "The claim of extreme markedness thus seems to rest on a hunch about plausibility." And different researchers have different hunches.

3.2 Extended egocentricity

- Functionalist hypothesis: the excluded contrasts simply cannot be conceptualized, therefore language cannot express/grammaticalize these, regardless of assumptions about formal properties/UG.
 - Regarding U1: Boas 1911: 1st person is not the speaker but the *self*, and there can never be more than one self. See also Sokolovskaja 1980, Greenberg 1993, on uniqueness of *ego*
 - Regarding U2, U3: Levinson 1988: pronouns may adhere to 'prototype' semantics based on canonical situation where there are only two discourse participants, so 'speaker' and 'addressee' exhaust the relevant roles. This implies possibility of unique *tu* alongside unique *ego* in universal inventory.
- Bobaljik's response: this might seem to be a functionalist explanation, but in fact it is formalist.
 - Regarding U1: It relies on a restriction peculiar to language. The uniqueness of the *ego* might be language-independent, but the account of the facts rests on premise that the morphological category 1st person universally denotes [ego] and not [speaker].
 - Regarding U2, U3: If linguistic contrasts must adhere to 'prototypes' this is actually a property of language and not of general cognition. Cognitive work on discourse (e.g. in sociolinguistics, ethnography) identifies many more roles than what we find grammaticalized in language (e.g. multiplicity of 2nd person types (e.g. 'addressee' (person to whom utterance is addressed vs 'target' (person to whom the message is addressed) and 'hearer' (person who hears the utterance)). Why should language be indifferent to finer distinctions? The answer must have to do with linguistic and not cognitive/conceptual universals.