Markedness and Morphological Change

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Course on Morphological Change

Part I: Introduction

Intro examples …

✳ …of alleged markedness effects in morphological change

✳ OE endingless plurals like *word* > ModE *words*, because formal identity of singular and plural is supposedly a relatively <u>marked</u> pattern, compared to having a plural suffix.

✳ Verbs with stem alternations between present and past, like MHG *hœren–hôrte*, generally level in favor of the present alternant: MSG *hören-hörte*, not *horen–horte*, because the singular is supposedly the <u>unmarked</u> tense, while past is <u>marked</u>.

What is markedness? (1)

✳ Original use of term referred to an asymmetry in binary oppositions:

  ✳ semantic: 'long' vs. 'short' (the unmarked term is the one used in contexts where the oppostion is neutralized, e.g. "normal" questions: How <u>long</u> is the break? vs. ?How <u>short</u> is the break?

  ✳ phonetic/phonological: oral vowel (unmarked) vs. nasal vowel (marked)

  ✳ morphosyntactic: indicative (unm.) vs. subjunctive (m.)

What is markedness? (2)

✳ From the original sense described on the last slide, the use of "markedness" in linguistics has been extended in a number of ways.

✳ Most relevant for our purposes:
(1) The term has come to be applied to <u>paradigmatic patterns</u> (not just to individual items or categories).
(2) Markedness treated as a <u>relative</u> and <u>gradient</u> notion: Forms and patterns are no longer simply marked or unmarked; they are <u>more</u> or <u>less</u> marked than other forms and patterns.

Marked can mean...

❋ (among other things)

❋ indicated by a morphological marker, e.g. Eng. plural *-s*, as opposed to the "unmarked" singular

❋ semantically/functionally more specific (or more complex) ≈ distributionally more restricted

❋ Inherently more <u>difficult</u> for humans to process (or learn, or produce).

❋ Irregular/abnormal/anomolous as opposed to the "unmarked" regular forms/patterns.

Unmarked can be equated with...

❋ regular

❋ default

❋ simple, as opposed to complex

❋ easy, as opposed to difficult (to process/use/learn)

❋ "preferred" (see "Preference Theory")

❋ "natural"

❋ "normal"

❋ frequent (within a language or cross-linguistically)

❋ **Is there any coherent concept here?**

Markedness in linguistic theory

✳ Markedness (in one sense of another) has figured prominently in many diverse theoretical approaches:

✳ Prague school

✳ Generative phonology

✳ Natural morphology

✳ (and perhaps above all:) Optimality Theory

Markedness and morphological change

✳ A very widespread claim: morphological change should favor the <u>un</u>marked over the marked.

✳ The historical tendency should be:
-elimination of **marked** forms and patterns
-survival and spread of **unmarked** forms and patterns

Danger of circularity

Patterns of morphological change are often cited as evidence of markedness assymetries:

"Why did pattern X replace pattern Y historically?"

   -"Because X is less marked than Y."

"How do we know that X is less marked than Y?"

   -"Because X replaced Y historically."

We need <u>independent criteria</u>...

...for determining markedness relations.

✳ Dressler et al. (1987:13–14) propose a number of diagnostics, claiming that more "natural" (=less marked) structures:
(1) are processed more easily in perception
(2) give rise to fewer speech errors
(3) are less likely to be affected by aphasia
(4) are acquired earlier
(5) occur more in child-directed speech
(6) are cross-linguistically more prevalent
(7) tend to be the dominant structures within languages
(8) are more likely to be reinforced and less likely to be eliminated in language change.

2 axes of directionality in morphological change

✳ <u>Inter</u>paradigmatic axis: Which paradigmatic <u>patterns</u> are most likely to extend their domain of application, and which are most likely to lose out?
e.g.: the OE *word* (sg.=pl.) pattern or the *stone–stones* (sg.+suffix = pl.) pattern?

✳ <u>Intra</u>paradigmatic axis: Which forms within the paradigm are most likely to serve as the unchanging "pivots" around which other forms change?
e.g. MHG *hæren–hôrte, > hören-hörte* or **horen–horte*

Markedness...

...is claimed to be relevant to directional tendencies in morphological change on <u>both</u> axes:

(1) less marked paradigmatic patterns supposedly tend to win out over more marked patterns

(2) less marked forms within the paradigm supposedly tend to serve as the unchanging pivots around which more marked forms change.

Part II: (Alleged/apparent) historical markedness effects on the <u>inter</u>paradigmatic axis.

"One-form–one-function"

* Claims about markedness effects on the <u>inter</u>paradigmatic axis often focus on an alleged universal preference for a one-to-one relationship between form and function (≈**isomorphism**).

Violations of isomorphism

✳ The alleged preference for one-to-one form-function mapping is violated in different ways by:
(1) allomorphy/synonymy (2 or more forms for one function paradigmatically)
(2) homonymy/syncretism (1 form for more than one function paradigmatically)
(3) multiple exponence (2 or more forms for one function syntagmatically)
(4) cumulative exponence (1 form for more than one function syntagmatically)

Examples consistent with isomorphism preference

✳ Regularization of strong verbs across Gmc.:
Eng. *glide–glode* > *glide–glided*, etc.
Ger. *falten–fielt* > *falten–faltete*, etc.
(affixal marking of grammatical distinctions is supposedly universally less marked than stem alternations.)

✳ Extension of Eng. *s*-plural at the expense of: Ø-plurals (*word*); umlaut plurals (OE *boc–bec*)
-BUT: *s*-plural replacing other <u>suffixal</u> plural markers is <u>not</u> motivated by any system-independent markedness principle:
OE *ǣg–ǣg**ru*** > *egg-egg**s***; *ēage-ēaga**n*** > *eye-eye**s***

Counterexamples, 1

✳ Ø-plural marking has gained some ground in English animal names:
OE *fisc–fiscas* > *fish–fish*; *elk–elk(e)s* > *elk–elk*

✳ <u>I</u>rregularizations of originally regular weak verbs across Gmc.:
Amer. Eng. *dive–dived* > *dive–dove*
OE *hringd-*/ME *ringed* > ModE *rang*
Ger. *weisen–weiste* > *weisen–wies* 'show'
Dutch dial.: *erven–geërfd* > *erven–georven* 'inherit'
OHG *meldēn–gimeldēt* > Yiddish *meldn–gemoldn*

Counterexamples, 2

✳ Eng. present = past
ME *quit–quited/quit(te)* > ModStE *quit–quit*
Amer. E. *fit–fitted* > *fit–fit/fitted* (w/ semantic diff.)
Also attested: *pet–pet*; *sled–sled*, etc.

On balance…

✳ it does appear that morpho(phono)logical changes that enhance isomorphism are more common than changes that diminish isomorphism.

✳ Does this mean that humans must have a universal "preference" for isomorphism?

"(Constructional) iconicity"

✳ Another proposed principle: It is natural (=unmarked) for there to be an <u>iconic</u> (diagrammatic) relationship between the degree of semantic/functional markedness of forms in a paradigm, on the one hand, and their phonological size/ morphological complexity, on the other hand.

✳ Examples:
unmarked pattern: MSG *Hund* (sg.)–*Hunde* (pl.)'dog'
marked pattern: dialectal: *Hund* (sg.)–*Hun* (pl).

marked pattern: Eng. *sta**n**d–stood*
less marked pattern: Ger. *steh-–stand-*

Local markedness/ markedness reversal

✳ Some linguists argue that "normal" markedness relations can be reversed under certain circumstances:
(1) For things commonly encountered in pairs or groups: plural (or dual) might be unmarked, and singular marked: e.g. Ger. *Eltern* 'parents' – *Elternteil* 'parent'

(2) If we conceive of a <u>set</u> of, e.g., **teeth** as something different from a mere collection of individual teeth, irregular/suppletive paradigms might be expected (Mayerthaler 1981; Tiersma 1982).

Isomorphism vs. "economy"

✳ Others argue that the (processing) preference for isomorphism coexists with a (production) preference for "economy": All else being equal, speakers prefer to express themselves as quickly and easily as possible.

✳ Apparent violations of the tendency for morphological change to increase isomorphism can supposedly be attributed to this countervailing principle (Nübling 2000; Croft 2003).

An "evolutionary" alternative

✳ "Evolutionary" approaches to language structure and typological generalizations have become increasingly popular in recent years (Blevins 2004; Bybee et al. 1994) (This is NOT about the evolution of language it the biological sense.)

✳ The basic idea: "synchronic" structural patterns within languages and across languages are largely attributable to the way languages develop historically rather than to "Universal Grammar" or cognitive preferences.

An "evolutionary" account of the tendency to level stem alternations

✴ (1) Speakers/learners simply "prefer" whatever patterns are most familiar to them, i.e. whatever patterns occur with highest frequency (**type** frequency) in their language.

✴ (2) Affixes tend to be "universally" much more common than stem alternations simply because of the different historical sources of these two types of marking of paradigmatic distinctions. (Explain.)

Part III: (Alleged/apparent) historical markedness effects on the <u>intra</u>paradigmatic axis.

Pivots and paradigm leveling

✳ On the <u>intra</u>paradigmatic axis, markedness is usually invoked to account (only) for the (dominant) direction of paradigm leveling:
Why *believe–beleft* > *believe–believed*, not: **belef–beleft*?
Why *old–elder–eldest* > *old–older–oldest*, **eld–elder* ...?

✳ But the same principle applies generally to the intraparadigmatic directionality of analogical change wherever both directions are logically possible:
Gebäude (sg.) – *Gebäude* (pl.) > *Gebäude–?Gebäude**n**?*
vs. *??Gebäud (or Geb**au**d)?? – Gebäude*

Discussion of the intraparadigmatic directionality of analogical change almost always focuses on paradigm leveling simply because it is **always logically possible in both directions**.

Non-leveling changes are usually only logically possible in the "expected" direction (at least in Gmc languages):

e.g. Ger. dialectal:
Fisch (sg.) – *Fisch* (pl.) > *F**u**sch–Fisch*

Hypothetical:
*spät–später > *spat–später*

Strong directional tendencies in leveling

Nouns: sg -> pl:
ME *dai–dawes* > ModE *day–days*

Verbs: present -> past:
Ger. dial. *kennen–gekannt* > *kennen–kennt*
Eng. dial. *tell-told* > *tell-tell(e)d*

Adjectives: positive -> comparartive, superlative
Eng. *long–lenger–lengest* > *long–longer–longest*

Exceptions in these categories are rare:

✳ ME *lēnen–lende* > ModE *lend–lent*

✳ ME *sich* /sɪtʃ/*–sihte* > ModE *sigh–sighed*

✳ ME *gluff–gloves* > ModE *glove–gloves*
staff–staves > *stave–staves* (alongside *staff–staffs*)

Direction of leveling can show great variation when other categories are involved

✳ MHG *reit–riten* ('ride' 1/3 pret. sg.–pl.) >
MSG *ritt–ritten* (cf. English *rode*)
vs.
MHG *sang-sungen* > *sang-sangen*
(and many similar examples)

Frequency-based accounts

✳ Several scholars have argued that on the intraparadigmatic axis, "less marked" really just means more frequent in speech/texts (**token frequency**).

✳ Paul (1886), Bybee (1988), and others argue that the mental representations of forms get reinforced through repeated exposure and use, so the most frequent forms have the **strongest representations**, and are thus likely to serve as **anchors/pivots** for analogical replacement and are unlikely to be replaced themselves.

An alternative explanation...

* ...for frequency effects:

  the most frequent forms are simply the ones that learners are most likely to encounter <u>first</u>

  (and the least frequent are the ones that they are most likely not to encounter at all)

  -no need to posit that speakers' mental representations of forms and patterns reflect their frequency of use.

  (see also Albright 2008)

Against frequency

❊ Strong oppostion to frequency-based accounts of markedness assymetries goes back at least to Kuryłowicz.

❊ Relative frequencies of forms are argued to be a symptom of markedness assymetries, not the other way around.

❊ Kuryłowicz's 2nd "Law" of Analogy: Les actions dites 'analogiques' suivent la direction: forms de foundation ➜ forms fondées, dont le rapport découle de leurs **sphères d`emploi**.

A pessimistic assessment

"Predictions of a finite range of outcomes in morphological change and of the probability of which competing variant wins appear possible and testable only in very small, self-contained domains and when domain-external influences can be excluded. In other words, predictions about diachronic change only have a chance of success in exceptional cases." (Spina and Dressler 2011: 535)

So where does that leave us as historical linguists? Should predictions of this sort be our primary objective?

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