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 marked pattern, compared to having a plural suffix.

Verbs with stem alternations between present and past, like MHG *hœren–hôte*, generally level in favor of the present alternant: MSG *hören-hörte*, not *horen–horte*, because the singular is supposedly the unmarked tense, while past is marked.
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 opposition is neutralized, e.g. "normal" questions: How long is the break? vs. ?How short 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 paradigmatic patterns (not just to individual items or categories).
  2. Markedness treated as a relative and gradient notion: Forms and patterns are no longer simply marked or unmarked; they are more or less 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 difficult 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 unmarked 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 asymmetries:

"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 independent criteria...

...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

- **Interparadigmatic axis**: Which paradigmatic patterns 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?

- **Intraparadigmatic axis**: Which forms within the paradigm are most likely to serve as the unchanging "pivots" around which other forms change? e.g. MHG *hœren–hôrte*, > *hören-hörte* or *horen–horte*
Markedness...

...is claimed to be relevant to directional tendencies in morphological change on both 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 interparadigmatic axis.
Claims about markedness effects on the interparadigmatic 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 suffixal plural markers is not motivated by any system-independent markedness principle: OE āg–āgru > egg-eggs; ēage-ēagan > eye-eyes
Counterexamples, 1

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

- Irregularizations 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 iconic (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. stand–stood
  - less marked pattern: Ger. steh--stand-
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 set 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 intraparadigmatic axis.
Pivots and paradigm leveling

On the intraparadigmatic axis, markedness is usually invoked to account (only) for the (dominant) direction of paradigm leveling:

But the same principle applies generally to the intraparadigmatic directionality of analogical change wherever both directions are logically possible:
*Gebäude* (sg.) – *Gebäude* (pl.) > *Gebäude–?Gebäuden*? vs. ??*Gebäud* (or *Gebaud*)?? – *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.) > *Fusch–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 -> comparative, 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–ritten* ('ride' 1/3 pret. sg.–pl.) > MSG *ritt–ritten* (cf. English *rode*)
  vs.
  - MHG *sang–sungen* > *sang–sangen* (and many similar examples)
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 first

(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 opposition to frequency-based accounts of markedness asymmetries goes back at least to Kuryłowicz.

- Relative frequencies of forms are argued to be a symptom of markedness asymmetries, 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?
References


