What are phi-features supposed to do, and where?

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Is there such a thing as the representation of phi-features, which transcends the divisions between morphology, syntax, and semantics? What is a theory of phi-features supposed to do, exactly? Generate paradigms? Generate typologies? Generate meanings? Account for syntactic generalizations?

In this talk, I will be arguing:

(i) There is no such thing as a single, cross-modularly stable representation of phi-features;
(ii) A look at other empirical domains reveals that there is absolutely no reason to expect such a thing to exist;
(iii) The representation of phi-features in syntax is supposed to account for syntactic generalizations; accordingly:
  • in syntax, singular ≡ the absence of NUMBER
  • in syntax, 3rd person ≡ the absence of PERSON
  (i.e., the representation of NUMBER and PERSON in syntax is privative)

The arguments in support of (iii) will include the cross-linguistic typology of what I call phi-neutralization—what happens when phi-valuation has demonstrably failed—as well as the more familiar argument from the typology of omnivorous agreement effects.

A significant portion of the talk, however, will be devoted to establishing (ii)—that is, arguing that we should not expect there to be a single, uniform, cross-modular representation of phi-features. I will survey a variety of other empirical domains where the mappings between morphology, syntax, and semantics self-evidently fray apart. And I will argue that the expectation of a fully reliable mapping between syntax and morphology, between syntax and semantics, and, a fortiori, between morphology and semantics, reflects a category error.

It elevates what is an indispensable methodological heuristic (“assume transparent mapping unless there is evidence to the contrary”) to the status of invariant grammatical principle (“the mapping between two modules M and N is reliable and transparent”). I will argue that such an elevation is not only unjustified on theoretical grounds, but also, that we have plenty of evidence against it.