Person, Number, and the Architecture of Grammar

PART ZERO: Course Overview

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General course information

- It assumes basic familiarity with the generative approach to linguistics
  - as well as some basic concepts in syntax

➤ That said: please don’t assume that if you don’t understand something, it’s your fault
- Part of what I want to do here is develop a “feel” for the level of background you have as we go

⇒ So I’d like you to ask anything you don’t understand —
  (this includes any terms I use that you might not be familiar with)
  — and let me be the one who decides if it’s “required background” or its something I’d like to explain in class.

General course information

- Handouts: available after each class, at:
  https://omer.lingsite.org/lot-2018/

What this course is about

- This course is about the categories of PERSON and NUMBER in grammar

- There is a somewhat puzzling tradition —
  (puzzling in the context of the rest of generative linguistics, at least)
  — of treating PERSON and NUMBER as pan-modular linguistic primitives

  - that is, it is taken for granted that:
    - there exist primitive categories PERSON and NUMBER
    - and, furthermore, these categories align across morphology, syntax, and semantics
What this course is about

- My primary goal in this course is to get you to question this assumption
  - here, and in any subsequent course/talk/paper that you hear/read

- In the course of this week, we’ll examine several case studies that shed light on these issues
  - and we will see that in some cases, the conventional wisdom is quite radically wrong

A bit of terminology

- I’m going to be using the term $\varphi$-features
  - this term, which I think originates with Chomsky (1995:31), is a (quasi-)mnemonic for “formal features”

- It is more commonly used, though, as shorthand for:
  - PERSON, NUMBER, and GENDER(/NOUN-CLASS) features in syntax

  ➢ But, given what we just said, this is actually not a coherent concept...!
    - PERSON, NUMBER, and GENDER(/NOUN-CLASS) are semantic notions
    - the claim that these categories map straightforwardly onto syntax is a hypothesis
      – and, we will see, a false one at that

- With that in mind... ➢ let’s start with some basics on the syntax of $\varphi$-features