Representing and resolving feature conflicts—Bronwyn M. Bjorkman

Some syntactic structures appear to place conflicting requirements on a single word or phrase, e.g. require that a nominal be both nominative and accusative, or that a verb show both singular and plural agreement. While some languages resolve such conflicts systematically (e.g. closest conjunct agreement), and others allow "conflicting" features to all be realized morphologically (as in languages with case stacking), often such syntactic feature clashes are simply ungrammatical. In French, for example, (1) is ungrammatical because the first verb requires the accusative clitic *le*, and the second dative *lui* (Kayne, 1975).

(1) *Je { l' / lui } ai serrée dans mes bras et donné un baiser.
I 3SG.ACC / 3SG.DAT have hugged in my arms and given a kiss
Intended: "I have hugged her and given her a kiss."

Such feature conflicts can often—but not always—be resolved when their realization is **syncretic**, however. In French, for example, structures parallel to (1) become grammatical if the pronominal clitic is first or second person, which systematically do not distinguish accusative from dative case:

(2) Elle m' a serrée dans ses bras et donné un baiser.
She 1SG.ACC/DAT has hugged in her arms and given a kiss
"She hugged me and gave me a kiss."

Similar patterns have been described for many languages, including at least Finnish (Zaenen & Karttunen, 1984), German (Groos & van Riemsdijk, 1981), Hungarian (Szamosi, 1976), Norwegian (Taraldsen, 1981), Polish (Dyła, 1984; Citko, 2005), and Russian (Asarina, 2011).

Yet accounting for resolution via syncretism is a challenge for both lexicalist and realizational models of morphosyntax. Authors such as Ingria (1990) and Dalrymple & Kaplan (2000)—focusing on contraint-based syntactic theories like LFG and HPSG, but with points equally applicable to lexicalist versions of Minimalism—observe that if *me* in (2) can satisfy requirements for both accusative and dative features, the lexical item must be specified for both features, which raises a question of how the "extra" feature is dealt with in structures that require only accusative *or* dative, not both.

The situation is little better for interpretive models like Distributed Morphology (DM, Halle and Marantz 1993 et seq.). Given that syncretism *can* resolve feature conflicts in examples like (2), a head with mismatched features must be syntactically licit; (1) is thus only ruled out in the post-syntax. Classic DM predicts that any licit syntactic structure should have some morphological realization, however, so for morphology to act as a filter Vocabulary Insertion (VI) must be modified so that multiple features of the same type in a single position can *only* be realized by a syncretic form (as in Bjorkman 2016, Coon & Keine 2020). But now we must explain how some languages instead resolve multiple valuation via something like case stacking, others impose principled resolutions, and others still may allow multiple agreement between a single Probe and several Goals, as in some analyses of the Person-Case Constraint and Inverse alignment in Algonquian languages (Béjar & Rezac, 2003, et seq.).

I argue that the ability of syncretism to resolve feature conflicts is indeed best understood within an interpretive theory of morphosyntax like DM, but that in order to explain not only where resolution-via-syncretism *does* occur but also where it does not, previous proposals require both syntactic and morphological elaboration. On the syntactic side, the existence of resolution-via-syncretism strategies requires that syntactic Agree produce a separate feature bundle or set for each Probe-Goal pair that it relates—this is surprising if Agree copies feature values from a Goal to a Probe, but not if the output of Agree is instead a chain, i.e. the Agree-Link of Arregi & Nevins 2012. On the morphological side, the input to VI then would not be a syntactic head, variation across languages can be encoded as variation in how conflicting Agree-Link chains are resolved: by systematic resolution, by Fission into multiple positions of exponence, or via the creation of two parallel feature sets on a single head. It is only the last case that triggers multiple applications of VI in a single position, as in Bjorkman (2016) and Coon & Keine (2020), and thus only in such languages that resolution-via-syncretism is potentially relevant.