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1. INTRODUCTION

A grammatical category such as number or tense is traditionally described as an opposition built by two or more grammatical meanings (grammemes), so that all the lexemes belonging to the relevant class (for which the category under consideration is valid) reveal identical properties in relation to this category. Thus, lexemes belonging to the same class (say, substantives) may not take different grammemes of a category when being interchangeable without any difference in grammatical meaning in the same context.

This traditional approach is now being questioned. This trend is found in the works by I.A. Mel'čuk (1985: 258-264) and A.K. Polivanova (1983) who deal with Russian numeral expressions. Below I demonstrate the phenomenon of "grammatical asymmetry" basing it mainly on Polivanova's analysis.

2. ASYMMETRY IN NUMBER-MARKING ON RUSSIAN SUBSTANTIVES

As Polivanova (1983) indicates, number-marking on Russian nouns, even belonging to the same semantic group (e.g. designations of vegetables) varies in some contexts. This is entailed by the neutralisation of the number-opposition in the so-called "non-arithmetic" contexts where number-markers turn out to be "semantically empty", cf.:

(1) Oгурец / *Огурец дорожает
   cucumber:PL *cucumber:SG rise in price
   'Cucumbers rise in price'.

(2) Репа / *Репа дорогает
   turnip:SG turnip:PL rise in price
   'Turnips rise in price'.

It is clear that the difference in number-marking between (1) and (2) is not due to the semantic distinction 'plural ~ singular'. Taking this fact into account, Polivanova claims that Russian substantives may be divided at least into two classes:
Sg-oriented (cf. Rus. repa) and Pl-oriented (cf. ogurec). The former take singular markers in non-arithmetic contexts whereas the latter take plural ones.

Thus, the set of substantives turns out to have a rather complicated number-marking structure. Besides such well-known "defective" classes as singularia and pluralia tantum, there are subclasses whose "defectiveness" is more difficult to detect. These are oriented substantives. This serves as evidence for an inner asymmetry of the number considered as a category.

Below I present some more illustrations of asymmetry.

3. ASYMmetry IN DEFINITENESS

By analogy with examples analysed in the previous section, one may expect that the phenomenon of asymmetry would be particularly easy to observe in cases of neutralisation, i.e. in cases when the opposition 'definite/indefinite' is semantically irrelevant. For instance, English nouns when occurring in the context X goes to ...(designation of an educational institution) differ in their article properties. School and college are used without an article while university can be used with the definite article (it is optional in British English and obligatory in American English):

(3) John goes to school (college) / to (the) university

Thus, university should be qualified as Def-oriented.

In French, asymmetry of definiteness may be exemplified by designations of holidays, cf. à Noël, à Pâques, but à la Toussaint, à l'Ascension. Such examples are easy to find both in theoretical works and student grammars (cf. Mauger 1968: 103; Leech, Svartvik 1983: 186; and others).

4. ASYMmetry IN A DERIVATIONAL CATEGORY: CAUSATIVES

Asymmetry affects not only grammatical (inflectional) but also derivational categories. It is well-known that causative/non-causative verb alternations differ in the direction of derivation (for a detailed discussion, see Haspelmath (to appear)): either (i) the causative or (ii) the non-causative (anticausative) verb may be derived from the other member of the pair (directed oppositions); (iii) neither the non-causative nor the causative member may be derived from the other; finally, an opposition may be (iv) labile (cf. English break (itr.) - break (tr.)) or (v) suppletive. Different types often coexist in a language, cf. Hungarian buk 'fall' - buk-tat 'overturn (tr.)' (= type (i)); kever-ed 'mix (itr.)' - kever 'mix (tr.)' (= (ii)); der-ül 'become clear' - der-ül 'make clear' (= (iii)).

This implies classifying verbs according to the type of orientation. Such variations are likely to be numerous in every verbal dictionary. However, a
detailed typological investigation of the problem does not exist. The only exception I am aware of are pioneer works by V.P.Nedjalkov (1969; 1970); cf. also Haspelmath (to appear).

5. ASYMMETRY AS A LINGUISTIC PHENOMENON: PERSPECTIVES OF INVESTIGATION

A typological investigation of asymmetry and orientation seems to me very promising. The following problems are worth investigating:

5.1. Classification of categories in accordance with their "predisposition" to asymmetry

As demonstrated above, the category of number in Slavic languages appears to be highly "asymmetric" while such categories as tense are not. This is, however, not the case of some old Indo-European languages (such as Vedic Sanskrit) where the degree of tense asymmetry is much higher. In the latter there are "tense-oriented" verbs from which only (or predominantly) perfect or only present forms may be derived.

5.2. Classification of lexemes in accordance with the type of orientation

In general, the orientation of a lexeme is non-predictable and therefore should be indicated in a dictionary. However, some vague correlations with the meaning of the word may be formulated. Nedjalkov (1969) who investigated four causative pairs in 60 languages: 'laugh/make laugh', 'boil (itr.)/make boil', 'burn/make burn', 'break/make break' indicates that the probability of the opposition of type (i) (see section 4) is highest for the first pairs while anticausative and suppletive oppositions (types (ii) and (v)) are most common for the last pairs of this group. This implies a correlation with the degree of agency of the subject of the corresponding action (Nedjalkov 1969: 111).

Similarly, the number-orientation of nouns is likely to correlate with some physical properties of things while the tense-orientation of verbs seems to depend on characteristics of actions, etc.

5.3. Classification of languages

Languages may also be classified from the viewpoint of subgrouping of oriented lexemes. For instance, languages differ in their preference for various types of causative oppositions: in Russian and Romanian derivation of the anticausative member of a pair is most common; Mongolian and Indonesian have almost no anticausatives revealing a strong preference to causatives; in English non-directed labile oppositions are predominant (for an interpretation of this classification, see Haspelmath (to appear)).
6. CONCLUSIONS

Evidence for asymmetry may be observed in various grammatical and derivational categories. Unfortunately, these facts, i.e. "irregularities" in article choice, number-marking, verbal classification, etc., although mentioned in many grammars, are neglected by most grammarians or treated as something belonging to the periphery of a language system. Thus, asymmetry as a structural phenomenon has (as far as I know) never been the subject of a typological investigation.

For reasons of space, I cannot give here a detailed description of asymmetry, so I am forced to confine myself to a few illustrations of this phenomenon. My aim is only to draw attention to the notion of asymmetry and argue the fruitfulness of using it within a typological framework as well as in a theory of grammar.

NOTES

(1) This analysis appears to need some modifications. Namely, contexts are likely to be characterized as non-oriented/Sg-oriented/Pl-oriented, too. In particular, contexts illustrated by examples (1-2) appear to be Pl-oriented. The choice between singular and plural markers is thus governed by rather complicated rules based on an interplay of two orientations, lexemic and contextual ones. For reasons of space I am forced to confine myself to this brief remark without any detailed explanation.

(2) This problem has now become the subject of a detailed investigation by Haspelmath (to appear).

REFERENCES

Nedjalkov, V.P. (1970), O svjazi smyslových i formal'nyx oppozicij (k voprosu ob universalijax), In: A.Graur et al. (eds), Actes du Xe congrès international des linguistes, Bucarest, 593-597.