Redundancy and Deficiency in Morphosyntactic Change

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State of the Art and its (dis)contents

The standard view of the nature of syntactic variation has been the Borer-Chomsky Conjecture (BCC): the notion that such variation reduces to (a subset of) formal features of (a subset of) functional heads. However, while we have a reasonable extensional idea of what such formal features are (e.g. Person, Number, Case, Tense, Aspect, Mood, wh, D, Q, …), though such lists are always incomplete, no adequate intensional definition has been proposed until recently (see below). A particular consequence of this is that it undermines the BCC, since without such a definition, strictly speaking no predictions can be made about the limits to typological variation. Similarly, to the extent that morphosyntactic change is also variation in the diachronic domain (Lightfoot 1999), the BCC fails to make any predictions about change.

Kallulli and Roberts (2026) propose an alternative to the BCC, which relies on the notions of Redundancy (R) and Deficiency (D), where R and D are defined as follows:

(1) a. Redundancy (R): a feature is redundant if it is invisible to LF.
b. Deficiency (D): a feature is deficient if it is invisible to PF.

Kallulli and Roberts (2026) put forward the following R&D conjecture regarding the nature of morphosyntactic variation:

(2) Morphosyntactic variation arises from the interaction of Redundancy (R) and Deficiency (D) of formal features of functional heads.

This alternative provides the desired intensional definition of the central notion of formal feature which remedies the shortcomings of the BCC.

The goal of the present workshop is to explore the implications of (1) and (2) in the diachronic domain.

Deficiency in the Diachronic Dimension

One very clear way in which Deficiency manifests itself in diachronic change is in the levelling and loss of inflectional paradigms. If partial inflectional paradigms result from the application of impoverishment rules, then ongoing levelling of paradigms can be attributed to the generalisation of impoverishment rules, which in turn may be due to the simplification of such rules. Consider in this context English subject-verb agreement:

(3) a. [3Sg] —> z
b. [F] —> ø elsewhere

Here (3b) is an elsewhere impoverishment rule, applying in all contexts except 3Sg. This rule generalises Deficient realisation of φ-features, since it determines null exponence of features as the default in Modern English.

Gray (1985: 495ff.) gives the agreement paradigms in (4) for the present tense of the verb *cast* in East Midlands English at the end of the fifteenth century:

(4) cast
cast-est
cast-eth
cast-(e)
cast-(e)
cast-(e)

The realisation rules in (5) apply here:

(5) [1Sg] —> ø
[2Sg] —> əst
[3Sg] —> əθ
[Pl] —> (ə)

Here there are four distinct exponence rules, with the one impoverishment rule being highly specific and clearly not the elsewhere case. The rules in (3) only refer to a single specific feature, while those in (5) refer to five features (1, 2, 3, Sg, Pl). Here we see simplification in classical feature-counting terms (Chomsky and Halle 1968) and generalisation of impoverishment to the elsewhere case. All of this amounts to greater feature Deficiency at PF. We take this to be typical of paradigm levelling, readily describable in terms of Deficiency as defined in (1b) and potentially relevant for change to the extent that "rich" agreement is relevant for determining whether a language allows null subjects (Kallulli, Roberts and Yang 2026, KRY). In this latter connection, the history of French is relevant: KRY show that Yang's (2016) Tolerance Principle can accurately define the "rich" agreement necessary for an agreement-based null-subject system. They demonstrate that Modern French subject-verb agreement fails to meet the Tolerance threshold for "rich" agreement with the consequence that Modern French is correctly defined as a non-null-subject language. Old French, on the other hand, meets the threshold and is correctly defined as a null-subject language. Roberts (2026) shows that final-obstruent deletion levelled the agreement paradigms in the Middle French period in such a way that French ceased to be a null-subject language at (or very shortly after) this period. The phonological process of final-obstruent deletion fed a new set of impoverishment rules which levelled the French paradigms in the crucial respects. A similar argument can be made comparing case-marking on DPs (i.e. both articles and nouns) in Old vs Middle English: OE meets the Tolerance threshold for productive case-marking, ME fails to meet it. This in turn may be connected to word-order change, if productive case-marking can be construed as a trigger for roll-up movement. Thus we see that well-known examples of syntactic change can be understood in terms of deficiency.

Redundancy in the Diachronic Dimension

Redundancy is particularly relevant for grammaticalization. One such case is the grammaticalization of pronouns as agreement markers as seen in the development of many Northern Italian Dialects (Poletto 1995). In a series of works, Van Gelderen analyses this as interpretable features becoming uninterpretable, which is loss of independent denotations for the features in question, i.e. Redundancy. More generally, van Gelderen proposes the following development in several cases (her subject-agreement, object-agreement, copula and case cycles):

(6) Adjunct Specifier Head Ø
Semantic F > [iF] > [uF] > Ø

The second step of this cycle clearly involves Redundancy, as just described for subject agreement. The first involves the development of an Agree configuration, again inherently Redundant (especially if, following Kallulli and Roberts 2025, Agree can be reduced to Form Copy). The third stage involves Deficiency, as described in the previous section.

The Workshop

We would welcome papers which deal with any aspect of morphosyntactic change in any language (family) which respond to or take issue with the ideas outlined above, including acquisition and/or learnability.

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