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The Opacity-Compactness Tradeoff:

Morphomic Features for an Economical Account of Khaling Verbal Inflection

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Morphomic features (Aronoff, 1994) have been argued to allow for more elegant and more economical descriptions of inflectional systems (Bonami and Boyé, 2010). However, morphomic accounts are opaque from the morphosyntactic point of view and thus require an additional mapping between the morphomic features and the actual morphosyntactic property sets (MPS) expressed by the inflected forms (Stump, 2006) — something which is not needed if the MPSs are realised directly. Yet, no measures have been proposed so far to quantitatively assess the tradeoff between the lower complexity achieved by relying on opaque morphomic features and the additional need for an explicit feature mapping.

In this paper, we show that the descriptive economy achieved by capturing the inherent morphomic structure of inflectional systems can effectively be assessed through dedicated compactness measures.

We present two competing analyses of Khaling verbal inflection based on original data from Jacques *et al.* (2012). These two analyses will be called descriptions A and B hereafter. Khaling is a highly inflectional language of the Kiranti subbranch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, spoken by about 15,000 people in Eastern Nepal. Verbs realise up to 572 verb forms, among which 300 realis forms. Due to numerous syncretisms, these 300 realis forms reduce to only 100 distinct forms.

Among our two descriptions, DESCRIPTION A uses realisation rules based on standard MPS (such as A1S.P2S). DESCRIPTION B comprises rules realising morphomic features (such as B, C, D, etc. in Table 2) and their corresponding feature mapping functions (such as B: 1DU.INCL). We show that the paradigm structure of Khaling verbs is best described using morphomic features of the type proposed for Nepali by Bonami and Boyé (2010) together with another morphomic feature related to the direct/inverse marking system based on the language’s empathy hierarchy, as commonly used for describing Algonquian languages (Silverstein, 1976; Zúñiga, 2006).

We show that if one ignores the direct/inverse marking (i.e., the presence of the inverse prefix ʔi-), the resulting additional syncretisms decrease the number of distinct forms from above mentioned 100 to only 68. These additional syncretisms are illustrated by the coloring in Table 1 for the non-past positive subparadigm. Additional morphomic feature mappings, such as posing a unique feature F for all forms expressing a P=2SG, then allows for further syncretic reduction. Table 2 shows how for the non-past positive subparadigm alone, the number of 75 distinct MPSs can be collapsed into 22 morphomic feature bundles such as single feature F or feature bundle $X>1.2SG$. Among these 22 morphomic feature bundles, 12 are complex features, but 10 are simple features, thus greatly simplifying the the expression of form realisation rules within the grammar (*lô:p-nu* becomes simply the realisation of feature K instead of that of features $3PL>3$, $3DU>3DU$, $3DU>3PL$, $2SG>3PL$ plus the inverse marked $2SG>3PL$).

↓A P→	1SG	1DU.INCL	1DU.EXCL	1PL.INCL	1PL.EXCL	2.SG	2DU	2PL	3SG	3DU	3PL
1SG						loðm-ne	loðm-su	loðm-nu	lob-u	lob-u-su	lob-u-nu
1DU.INCL										løp-i	
1DU.EXCL						ʔi-loop	ʔi-løp-i	ʔi-loðm-ni		løp-u	
1PL.INCL										loop-ki	
1PL.EXCL						ʔi-loop	ʔi-løp-i	ʔi-loðm-ni		loop-ka	
2SG	ʔi-loðm-ŋA								ʔi-lô:b-u	ʔi-lô:p-su	ʔi-lô:p-nu
2DU	ʔi-loðm-ŋA-su									ʔi-løp-i	
2PL	ʔi-loðm-ŋA-nu									ʔi-loðm-ni	
3SG	ʔi-loðm-ŋA								lô:b-u		
3DU	ʔi-loðm-ŋA-su	ʔi-løp-i	ʔi-løp-u	ʔi-loop-ki	ʔi-loop-ka	ʔi-loop	ʔi-løp-i	ʔi-loðm-ni		lø:p-su	
3PL	ʔi-loðm-ŋA-nu										lø:p-nu

Table 1. Positive non-past paradigm for the Khaling verb LOP ‘catch’, represented with standard features

Our two descriptions have been implemented on 167 verbs, producing 50,100 verb forms. We have measured the descriptions in terms of descriptive economy following Sagot and Walther (2011). This measure relies on the information theoretical concept of Minimum Description Length (MDL) (Rissanen, 1984). The measure allows in particular for showing the amount of information within different parts of the de-

X	X>I	I>X	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
2SG	loðm-ŋA	loðm-nɛ										
2DU	loðm-ŋA-su	loðm-su										
2PL	loðm-ŋA-nu	loðm-nu	løp-i	løp-u	løp-ki	løp-ka	løp	løp-i	loðm-ni	løb-u	løp-su	løp-nu
3S	loðm-ŋA	lob-u										
3DU	loðm-ŋA-su	lob-u-su										
3PL	loðm-ŋA-nu	lob-u-nu										

Table 2. Positive non-past paradigm for the Khaling verb LOP ‘catch’, reorganised after having introduced morphomic feature mappings E.g., B: 1DU.INCL, F: P=2SG, I: 2SG>3SG or 3SG>3SG, ...

scription, such as regular morphonological rules at morph boundaries (“phono+morphono”), the types of phonological “operations” applied by the realisation rules, the information comprised within the “feature” specification and the feature mapping rules, and the general “structure” of the description, including the complexity of the realisation rules or the specified inflection classes.

In our experiment, the measure shows that the length of standard description A (with realisation rules realising transparent fully specified MPSs) is 6.2 Kbits, while the length of morphomic description B (realising above mentioned morphomic features in the rule sets coupled with separate inverse marking and morphomic mapping functions) is 5.4 Kbits.

These results show that using morphomic features makes for a description that is by 12% more compact than the non-morphomic description. In particular, the additional cost of feature mapping functions (here formalised with a mechanism similar to rules of *Paradigm Linkage* in PFM (Stump, 2006)) does not lead to a higher overall description length (due to the simplification of the realisation rules themselves). As illustrated by Figure 1, the additional information needed to stipulate the mapping between the morphomic features and the actual realised morphosyntactic property sets appears to be a more than reasonable tradeoff compared to the reduced length of the general description’s structure.

Combined with supplementary morphomic features, direct/inverse marking as traditionally used as a distinctive feature within descriptive linguistics thus proves to be quantitatively relevant for describing some morphological systems, as it can lead to formulating maximally compact descriptions.

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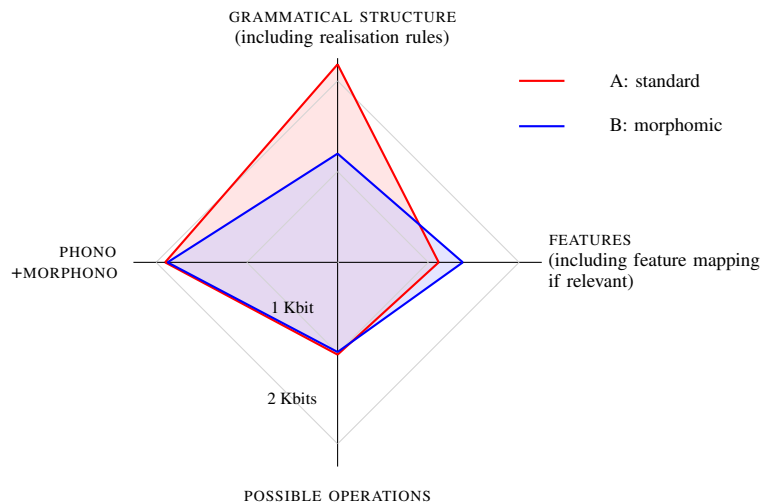


Fig. 1. Comparative description lengths for two accounts of Khaling verbal inflection, breakdown on grammar components

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