Syntactically arbitrary inflectional morphology*

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0. INTRODUCTION

What is the relation between the formal categories of inflectional morphology and the structures revealed by a syntactic analysis of the sentences, phrases, etc. within which they occur in language? There is a clear temptation in analyzing a language to take its morphology absolutely at face value as an indicator of sentence structure. I will argue here, though, that this temptation should be resisted, since morphology is often systematically misleading as a guide to syntactic form. In making this point, my goal is by no means to denigrate morphology: what I intend, rather, is to urge that it be taken seriously in its own right, and not treated as a sort of 'poor man's syntax'.

The tendency to interpret morphological markers as direct indications of syntactic structure, and by extension to take morphological categories as ipso facto syntactic ones, is surely explained (at least in part) by the historical fact that linguists had reasonably clear notions of the internal structure of words well before they had much in the way of an explicit theory of syntax. Indeed, in much traditional grammar syntactic discussion is simply appended to the (more extensive) treatment of word formation, with syntax considered a sort of 'applied morphology' ('Uses of the Dative', etc.).

In typological studies, it was morphological categorization that long held pride of place, with morphologically grounded labels such as 'agglutinating', 'polysynthetic' etc. continuing into current work as a presumptively interesting classification of the world's languages. As theories of syntax became more sophisticated, typologists focused more of their attention on non-morphological properties, especially patterns of word order. But even as the object of these studies turned to syntax, the central source of evidence for the syntactic structure of natural language sentences, clauses, etc. continued to come from morphology, and particularly from inflectional morphology.

Now as an analytic heuristic, this is by no means unreasonable: in general, inflection such as agreement and case marking is the locus of interaction of morphological and syntactic structure in grammar. One might thus expect inflectional classes to be essentially coextensive with syntactic ones, disregarding additional factors that might lead to further fractionation on either side. In many languages, however, the correspondence between inflectional class and syntactic structure turns out to be locally arbitrary. This may be true either of a subset of a language's lexicon, or of some particular class of morphosyntactically characterizable structures, or even of the overall architecture of a language's inflectional system. For instance, a language may display a clear overall correlation of particular inflectional markers with specific syntactic argument types; but the signalling of arguments through
agreement and/or case marking within the relevant class of cases may be systematically misleading. In extreme cases, a language may assign inflectional markers according to principles that have the effect of obscuring the structurally unitary categories of the syntax, perhaps as a consequence of historical restructuring.

This suggests, as Mark Baker put it in his comments on the symposium on inflectional classes at which this material was first presented, that morphology has its own internal logic, with its own rules, patterns, and systems of defaults. Morphological patterns often correspond in a general way to phonological, semantic and syntactic categories, but the correspondence is not close enough to permit a reduction. (Baker 1991)

If this is indeed true, the utility of morphological evidence for syntactic structure is seriously compromised. More seriously, the viability of the notion of a uniform domain of ‘Morphosyntax’ seems dubious. Rather, it seems grammarians should seek to understand the morphology and the syntax of a language each from its own point of view, with the complex patterns of surface form arising out of the interactions of these (and other) modules of grammatical organization.

The organization of this paper, progressing from what some will see as the boringly specific to what others will surely find annoyingly general, is as follows. Most of the discussion is devoted to some fairly clear examples of mismatches between syntactic structure and the inflectional markings associated with it. These range from individual lexical idiosyncrasies to productive construction types. The examples to be discussed will not seem all remarkable to any linguist who has devoted some attention to the detailed study of virtually any language: these are the sorts of annoying residues to be found in every grammar. I will suggest, however, that their very possibility (and in some cases, their generality) suggest that their potential importance for an understanding of language has usually been under-estimated. As an illustration of an even more general mismatch between morphology and syntax, I will then drag out of the closet the (by now, rather tired) issue of what it means to call a language ‘ergative’ as opposed to ‘accusative’, and suggest that the only way to make sense of this matter is on the basis of a clear distinction among the syntax, the morphology, and the semantics (both lexical and compositional) of a language. This discussion will lead into a short homily concerning the importance of a notion of modularity to the study of grammar, and especially to an appreciation of typological characterizations of languages.

1. MISMATCHES BETWEEN INFECTION AND ARGUMENT STRUCTURE

I will begin by looking at some languages which display relatively rigid morphological patterns, generally closely associated with syntactic form; but where there are some circumstances in which the syntax and the morphology are not appropriately matched. Let us first consider some examples taken from languages of the Algonquian family. Verbs in Algonquian languages fall into four rather strict classes, indicated with little or no ambiguity by the form of the Verb itself and also by the pattern of agreement marking which appears on it. This classification is based on two factors: (a) whether or not a given Verb takes a direct object; and (b) the animacy of one of the Verb’s arguments (the Subject, in intransitive cases, or the direct object with transitive). A Verb’s assignment to a particular class is formally marked by the choice of one of a set of ‘final’ suffixes as well as by other aspects of its inflectional structure.

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<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Sbj</th>
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<td>II</td>
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<td>AI</td>
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<td>TI</td>
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<td>TA</td>
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Within this system, however, there are a number of Verbs that are inflected transitively despite the fact that they do not (necessarily) subcategorize a direct object. Examples are given in (2) of such ‘Formal’ objects (to adopt Bloomfield’s terminology) in two of the languages of the family.

(2) a. Menomini (Bloomfield 1962: 46):
   i. a-qnahamah ‘he goes (especially, he paddles) against the wind’
   ii. noqnoonam ‘he swims’
   iii. nema-mi-qtehko-skanan ‘I go bare-legged’ [plural object]
   iv. ene-nehtam ‘he thinks thus of it/he thinks so’
   v. mo-hkanam ‘he uncovers it/he (a heavenly body) rises’

b. Fox (Bloomfield 1927: 193):
   i. kwagohotamwa ‘he whoops’
   ii. usehkumwa ‘he heads that way’
   iii. kohkahamwa ‘he tips over (on the water, −ah−)’
   iv. ahkwamatamwa ‘he is sick’
   v. behkahumwamwa ‘he knows it/he is conscious’

Particularly interesting, perhaps, is example (2aiii), where the Verb is structurally intransitive (not allowing the presence of a direct object NP), but inflected as if it had a third person plural object. Examples (2aiiv, 2av, 2bv) are instances in which a Verb is lexically ambiguous: it has a literal sense, in which it is transitive, and an additional figurative sense in which it is syntactically intransitive, though inflected as if it had an object.

The etiology of the problem displayed by these examples appears relatively straightforward, and is probably to be found in the historical process of idiom formation. A construction which was syntactically unexceptional in its
More generally, though, we might treat Class III Verbs as subcategorizing for a syntactic object position, but for some reason not allowing that position to be filled by an overt NP. This suggestion fails as an explanation, however, since we can in fact see that these Verbs pattern systematically as intransitives. In particular, the causatives of series III Verbs follow the pattern of transitives if and only if they actually have an object. In Georgian, as in e.g. French, the subject of an intransitive appears as the direct object of the corresponding causative, while the subject of a transitive Verb appears as an indirect object of the corresponding causative. We see in (5) that a true transitive Verb with an omissible object (e.g. 'write') nonetheless forms its causative consistently according to the transitive pattern; while a 'medial' Verb like 'play' forms its causative according to the transitive pattern only if it actually has an object.

(5) a. i. vano-s davačerine čerili
    Vano-dat I-caused-him-to-write-it letter-nom
    I got Vano to write a letter
  
    ii. vano-s davačerine
    Vano-dat I-caused-him-to-write-it
    I got Vano to write it

    b. i. vano-s vatamaše nardi
    Vano-dat I-caused-him-to-play backgammon-nom
    I got Vano to play backgammon
  
    ii. vano(s) vatamaše
    Vano-nom/*dat I-caused-him-to-play
    I got Vano to play

We conclude that Class III Verbs are syntactically intransitive, and differ from other syntactically intransitive Verbs (those usually assigned to 'Class II' in discussions of Georgian grammar) in being inflected as if for an object argument which is not syntactically present in the structure of sentences in which they occur.¹

A final example of this type can be adduced from another Caucasian language (this time North Caucasian). Tsova-Tush ('Bats'; cf. Holisky 1987) allows first or second person subjects of many intransitives to be marked either nominative or ergative depending on relative agentiveness. Third person subjects, in contrast, are always marked nominative with intransitives, and ergative with transitive Verbs. In despite of this generalization, however, there are a small number of intransitives whose subjects are consistently marked ergative in all three persons. These include the following:

(6) a. ga=maršba(d)dar 'win, be victorious'
  b. mušeba(d)dar 'work'
  c. h'acq'ar/h'ecq'ar 'pinch (of shoes)'
  d. curi h'aqar 'swim'
The inflectional patterns of sentences containing these Verbs would thus suggest (misleadingly) that they are transitive, despite the impossibility of their taking an object. In the cases surveyed to this point, we find an inflectional pattern that indicates an argument that does not exist from the point of view of the syntax.

The inverse of the situation described above would be a case in which the inflectional pattern of a clause systematically suggested fewer arguments than are actually present. This situation, too, is found in several Algonquian languages, where a few AI Verbs can take objects syntactically despite their intransitive inflection. Bloomfield refers to these as ‘pseudo-objects’ of ‘pseudo-transitives’ (although there is nothing particularly ‘pseudo’ about the status of their objects except the morphology) or as ‘implied objects’ (although they are not merely implied, but overtly present syntactically). In these cases, the Verb belongs formally to a class of intransitives, imposes animacy restrictions on its subject (not object), and bears an inflection that does not indicate any properties of an object.

(7) a. Menomini:
   i. nepe w neka-ta-mene: m ‘I want to drink some water’
   ii. napa-kehnasecenawa h-tepa-hake‘ he is going off to sell flat timbers’
   iii. awe-ksakom e ota-komew ‘he has a bearskin as his robe’
   iv. enoh we-kigset anenoh ape-hnihsan ‘the person who has him/ them as son(s)’

   b. Fox:
   i. acihtôwa ‘he makes it’
   ii. wîtîpaq ic inâhkwâci uwîci ‘whence comes the dawn, in that
direction they flung the head’
   iii. nîh-uwiw ketânesa ‘I shall have as wife thy daughter’
   iv. nîh-utóqimâgíniwewa kîiwa ‘Let us (excl.) have a chief, (namely) thyself’

As illustrated by several of these examples, this phenomenon is quite common with (though by no means limited to) ‘incorporation’ structures with a possessive sense (“have a robe, a son, a wife, a chief” etc.). Such verbal forms can be used intransitively, but they can also be elaborated by the presence of an object NP which provides further information on the properties of the ‘incorporated’ object. This information may elaborate the semantics of the object (as in 7aiii), or it may supply a referent (as in 7aiv, 8ii, biv).

In some cases, at least in Fox, related forms show passivization of the implied object:

(8) a. acihtûwa ‘it is made’
    b. â-wâpâhkâgi ‘then (he) was flung’

Most of the modern Algonquian languages show a class (varying considerably in size from language to language) of such syntactically transitive but inflectionally intransitive Verbs. In at least one language of the family (Eastern Ojibwa: see Bloomfield 1957), on the other hand, a new inflectional pattern has developed, by which such Verbs generally follow the peculiarities of the AI conjugation but with the addition of markers for plurality or obviation of their ‘implied’ objects.

A particularly interesting example of the AI Verb plus ‘implied’ object construction is provided by Maliseet as described by Sherwood (1986). This language displays a small number of AI Verbs that take objects which they do not indicate by agreement:

(9) a. kâmôtâne akâm
    steal-indic.-3 snowshoe-anim.obv.pl.
    He stole the snowshoes

    b. can pitkame âk*tewakâmôl
    John pack-indic.-3 clothing-inan.pl.
    John packed the clothes

    c. can pitkame cikâni
    John pack-indic.-3 apple-anim.obv.pl.
    John packed the apples

Sherwood observes that there are two systematic restrictions on these ‘pseudo-objects’ of AI Verbs: (1) the object cannot be first or second person; and (2) if the subject is third person obviative, the object cannot be third person proximate. These limitations, however, seem to be anything but arbitrary. Both are to be explained by the fact that verbal inflection is necessary to indicate non-third person arguments, and also to indicate action by an obviative participant on a proximate participant. Since AI Verbs lack the apparatus of transitive inflection, they cannot accommodate such structures, even though they can subcategorize for an object NP argument.2

Turning from the anomalous properties of individual lexical items (or classes) to productive constructions, we again find that an otherwise regular morphological pattern may appear in some cases in ways that are systematically misleading with respect to the syntactic status of certain arguments.

In Georgian, there are two sets of circumstances in which we find a construction often referred to as ‘inversion’: (a) a class of verbs such as miqâvârs ‘I love her’ for which the notional subject, in all tense forms, has the morphological characteristics of an indirect object and the direct object has the characteristics of a subject; and (b) the ‘Perfect’ series of tenses, in which transitive Verbs (and those that are merely formally transitive, as discussed above) display the same properties.

(10) a. gela-s u-qvar-var (me)
    Gela-dat he-loves-me (me)
    Gela loves me
shows that on syntactic grounds, no such syntactic inversion should be assumed (at least for Cree). Two arguments suggested by Dahlstrom are the following. First, in Cree Quantifiers can only ‘float’ from direct objects. Nonetheless, the proximate patient of an inverse Verb behaves as an object for the purposes of this rule.

(12) pe-yak pihon nipahikwak
    one only they (obv)-killed-him(prox)
    e-wakonik o-ki
    those these

    They (obv) killed only one of them (prox.)

Secondly, there is a construction in Cree with certain complement-taking Verbs in which the matrix Verb can be inflected to agree with the embedded Subject.3

(13) a. nikishe:yheit-e n-e:no:h-te-sipwe-h-t-e
    I-know-it (TI) he-wants-to-leave
    I know he wants to leave

    b. nikishe:yima:w john e:no:h-te-sipwe-h-t-e
    I-know-him (TA) John he-wants-to-leave
    I know (of him, that) he wants to leave

When the embedded Verb shows an inverse form, it is still the notional subject that is copied in this construction, as we see in the following examples.

(14) a. nikishe:yheit-e john e:ki:wa:pamisk
    I-know-it (TI) John he-saw-you (inverse)
    I know John saw you

    b. nikishe:yima:w john e:ki:wa:pamisk
    I-know-him (TA) John he-saw-you (inverse)
    I know (of John, that) John saw you

Dahlstrom’s arguments establish the proposition that in Cree, inverse Verb forms are associated with structures which are entirely parallel to those associated with direct Verb forms. In particular, no reversal of grammatical positioning is involved in these forms, and the syntactic subject is the same as the ‘notional’ one. Now there is little doubt, on the basis of comparative and historical evidence, that the inverse Verb forms have their origins in a ‘passive’ paradigm, but in the modern language this passive morphology has simply been reanalyzed as the marker of certain subject-object combinations.4 It is of course possible that in some Algonquian languages, genuinely syntactic arguments exist for a (non-morphological) process of inversion. What matters to us for present purposes, however, is the fact that in others

As in the Georgian case, the morphology of Algonquian has led some writers (e.g. Rhodes (1976) for Central Ojibwa, LeSourd (1976) for Fox) to argue that inverted forms are produced through a syntactic reorganization of clauses akin to passive. Again, however, the arguments for this position in those works have been morphological in character; and Dahlstrom (1986)
(at least in Cree), the morphology of the inverted forms appears misleading as an indicator of the associated syntactic structure.

2. ERGATIVITY

So what are we to conclude from these (and other) examples of local or systematic mismatches between syntactic and inflectional structure? The first kind of case should show us that there is both a morphological and a syntactic sense to notions like 'transitive'; and while the match between the two is quite good, it is not perfect. Hence, the syntax cannot simply be read off from the inflectional morphology. There must be some way for syntactic information to be available to the morphology, but the uses to which this information is put may be far from transparent, for a variety of reasons (including historical factors, the competing demands of semantic and pragmatic factors, etc.). And in the case of constructions like 'inversion' in Georgian or Algonquian, such a complex pattern of relations between syntax and inflection may be completely systematic.

The way to understand the structure of a language, then, is not to assume that there is a unitary set of morphosyntactic categories, but rather to adopt a 'modular' point of view. This entails analyzing the syntax on the basis of syntactic phenomena, while construing the morphology as providing hints but not unambiguous arguments; and then analyzing the processes of word formation in the language and the ways in which syntactic information is used (or disregarded) in the operation of these processes.

These remarks will certainly recall, for anyone who was interested in language typology fifteen years or so ago, the discussions that developed at that time about the notion of ergativity in linguistic structure. As is by now thoroughly familiar, an 'ergative-absolutive' pattern is one in which the formal marking of the (notional) subject of a transitive verb is distinct from the marking of an intransitive Verb's subject, while the notional object of a transitive Verb patterns with intransitive subjects. Consider the following examples from Avar:

\[(15)\] a. emen, roqove \(v\)-us\(\text{a}\)na
father,(abs.) home he\(\text{r}\)-returns
'Father returns home'

b. eb\(\text{e}\)l, roqove j\(-\text{us}\)ana
mother,(abs.) home she\(\text{r}\)-returns
'Mother returns home'

c. ins\(\text{u}\)-ca eb\(\text{e}\), j\(-\text{eca}\)ula
father,erg mother,(abs.) he\(\text{r}\)-praised
'Father praised mother'

Here both case marking and agreement follow the 'ergative' pattern.

The discovery of 'ergative languages' by European linguists provoked considerable consternation, since they appeared to present a serious mismatch between the categories provided by their morphology and the syntactic structure that would be expected on the basis of better known languages (of the accusative type). The tendency to interpret this as symptomatic of an 'exotic' structure was perhaps heightened by the fact that the first ergative languages to come to the attention of European linguists — Basque and the languages of the Caucasus — were already unusual on genetic grounds, in not being related to Indo-European. One reaction to this was to suggest that the syntactic structure of these languages really was very different from that of 'accusative' languages — perhaps something along the lines of the view that their basic sentence structure corresponds to that of passives in a language like English. And this kind of rather radical difference, in turn, suggested to many that the difference between ergative and accusative languages ought to have profound consequences, and thus be a basic typological parameter.

Research in the 1970s, however, suggested that this conclusion was at least premature. In particular, when one looks at languages with ergative morphology through the lens of the syntax,\(^3\) what one sees is generally — with the notable exception of Dyrirbal, and perhaps a few others — the same structure as is present in accusative languages. That is, syntactic processes and generalizations, such as the principles governing the antecedents of anaphoric elements, the structural position of PRO in infinitival constructions, the formation of reduced conjunction structures, etc., seem to operate in essentially the same way and on the basis of essentially the same structure in the two classes of language. On the other hand, in Dyrirbal, as established conclusively in Dixon (1972), the predictions that would follow from the view that ergative languages have their arguments in different structural positions than accusative ones seem completely borne out.

If one adheres to the view of a unitary domain of 'morphosyntax', this suggests that there might be a sort of scale of ergative-ness, with Dyrirbal distinctively at one end, English perhaps at the other, and a language like Avar somewhere in between. Indeed, since perhaps the majority of 'ergative' languages are 'mixed' — that is, they only display ergativity in limited parts of their morphology — one might take Avar to have 'more ergativity' than, say, Georgian (where agreement is generally nominative accusative, and case marking is only ergative in certain tense forms), but less than Dyrirbal.

This sort of description in terms of scales, rather than categories, seems quite attractive to some typologists, but I think a rather more coherent view comes out of another way of dealing with these facts. One can distinguish, in the terms of the literature of the 1970s and 1980s, between 'syntactic ergativity' and 'morphological ergativity'. This is essentially to adopt the modular view suggested above: deal with each of the syntax and the morphology in its own right, and describe the entire surface pattern as resulting from their interaction.

From the point of view of their syntax, most languages look quite similar in these terms. Even Dyrirbal, which seems so exotic at first glance, turns out to have roughly the same syntax as more familiar languages: it is only the
association between syntactic structural positions and semantic roles of the arguments of transitive Verbs that is typically the reverse in this language of what we find in others. This is indeed a categorical distinction, though it is less clear that it has further implications of the sort that would warrant calling it a ‘typological’ parameter in some more general sense.

From the point of view of the morphology of ‘ergative languages’, again, we find little justification for establishing a parameter of ‘degree of ergativity’. It is certainly the case that some languages have ergative case marking and agreement, some have one but not the other, and some have neither. This does not mean that there is any interesting multi-valued parameter of ‘ergative-ness’ that applies to morphologies as a whole, however. In fact, in terms of morphology, it seems that the interesting locus of variation is not the entire system of a language, but rather the individual rule.

More than a hundred years of research, for instance, have surely shown us that notions such as ‘agglutinative’, ‘fusional,’ and so on have no real coherent sense as applied to languages, though they make excellent sense as applied to particular rules (cf. Anderson 1990, Hagee 1990). Similarly it makes perfect sense to say that a given agreement rule operates ‘ergatively’ or ‘accusatively’, but to quantify over the number of rules of a given type in a particular language has no more general significance than a count of how many suffixes it has as opposed to Ablaut classes — or indeed, how many words begin with /t/ as opposed to /p/. Each of these things can be quantified, but the value (in the sense of predictions made about other aspects of grammar) of doing so remains to be demonstrated.

Ergativity, then, turns out to be a categorial parameter — or rather, several such parameters — though a matter whose typological significance is unclear. Syntactic ergativity, if this notion makes sense, is a question of whether agents or patients (roughly) appear as the subjects of transitive Verbs. Morphological ergativity is a property of particular rules, depending on which of two possible types of reference to syntactic structure is made by a given rule (see Anderson (1992) for some discussion of the mechanisms involved). Each is quite categorical, once we are clear about the proper locus within the grammar at which to raise the question.

We surely want to study other aspects of linguistic structure that bear on the overall kind of morphosyntax we call ‘ergativity’. Thus, many languages have principles of derivational morphology, compounding, or even semantic interpretation that appear to generalize intransitive subjects with transitive objects, not subjects. It seems, however, that what we are dealing with here is a class of rules associated with yet other modules of the grammar — the lexicon and principles of semantic interpretation — which operate in terms of relations like ‘theme’ vs. ‘agent’. Again, there is a partial but incomplete match between the categories of the syntax (and the morphology) and the (more) semantically founded relations characteristic of these other domains. And again, the analysis of these facts can only be carried out coherently if we see a grammar as composed of a number of quite distinct modules, each with its own set of primitives and principles; and the overall grammatical pattern of a language as resulting from the interaction of principles specific to these various domains.

3. CONCLUSION

If the study of relations between inflection and syntax does not lead to a morphological ‘philosopher’s stone’ for syntactic analysis, it leads nonetheless to a clearer view of the modular organization of grammar. The kinds of mismatches I have been discussing among the descriptions offered by various subparts of a grammar have obvious implications for the internal articulation of autonomous components within grammatical theory. The conclusion we ought to draw from these mismatches is that the Morphosyntactic Representations which form the informational interface between morphology and syntax are accessible to both aspects of the grammar, but have a structure which is not uniquely or mechanically determined either by syntactic form or by the properties internal to inflected words. In particular, it should not be assumed that the correspondence between syntactic and inflectional structure is simple and direct, so that evidence from one can be taken to determine the analysis of the other. The particular facts that help us to establish this conclusion are sometimes the kind that we are tempted to write off as marginal and exceptional, but we should remember that even a language’s irregularities are part of its structure. In developing a conception of grammar which supports the description of such exceptional cases, we are led to a deeper understanding of the locally autonomous nature of the components of linguistic form — a conclusion which is validated in part by the fact that in other languages, similar kinds of anomalous relations characterize not merely a few isolated lexical items, but the overall pattern of inflection. The lesson is the same as one we learn from the study of historical change: it is only by explicating the nature of the apparently arbitrary that we can fully understand what is regular in linguistic structure.

NOTES

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† There is an analysis on which the intransitive Verbs of classes II and III differ in their syntax, as well as their morphology. On this account, arguently as extensively by Harris (1981), class II Verbs are ‘unaccusative’ in the sense that their single argument appears underlingly in direct object position, while the single argument of class III Verbs is underlingly a subject. If we follow this line, the morphological classification of Verbs would reflect (at least in part) a syntactic classification, as suggested by Baker in his comments in this volume. The syntactic classification cannot be regarded as ‘explaining’ the morphology, however, for the reason that it appears to get the difference exactly backwards. Verbs belonging to class II, which have an underlying direct object, are inflected only for this argument construed as a (surface) subject; while Verbs belonging to class III, with an underlying subject and no direct object, are inflected both for their subject and for a non-existent third person singular object. We do not mean to suggest that there is no relation between syntactic and morphological classes in this case, but only that the relation is not at all straightforward. For further discussion of the tortuous but systematic connections between syntax and inflection in Georgian, see Anderson (1992, Ch. 6).
REFERENCES


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