Matthew Baerman

Tracking the amphisbænic paradigm: morphological polarity

The term *polarity* was coined by Meinhof (1912) to describe patterns of morphological reversal, characterized as 'when A becomes B under certain conditions, B becomes A under the same conditions'. He contended it was a valid psychological principle, particularly characteristic of the 'Hamitic' peoples (e.g. among the Nandi, boys dress like girls before their puberty rites, and girls like boys). The most familiar example of polarity comes from Semitic, where the gender marking pattern with numerals is the reverse of that found with adjectives, e.g. Hebrew *šloš-a yəladim* '3 boys' ~ *šaloš-Ø yaldot* '3 girls' vs. *yeled tov-Ø* 'good boy' ~ *yalda tov-a* 'good girls'. Over the last century the fortunes of polarity in linguistics have been mixed. On the one hand, it has been claimed that such a principle is psychologically implausible, and has no place in theory or description (Speiser 1938, Lecarme 2003). On the other hand it keeps resurfacing in different forms (e.g. as exchange rules (Chomsky and Halle 1968), markedness reversals (Smith 1979, Stoneham 1994), anti-faithfulness (Alderete 2001) and toggle morphemes (Kihm 2005)).

One striking feature of the whole discussion is the extreme paucity of examples that have been adduced; what's more, of those, many are dubious (e.g. the often-cited consonant polarity of Luo can easily be shown to result from the accidental overlap of two distinct rules). Our questions are these: Are there even enough examples to warrant constructing elaborate mechanisms to account for it? Is polarity simply a chimera?

Convincing examples of morphological polarity *are* vanishingly rare, but the few convincing ones show that some systematic account of them must be given:

(i) Semitic gender polarity.

(ii) Number in Nehan (Oceanic), where singular and plural markers are reversed for count and non-count nouns (Corbett 2000), e.g. *me lo* 'a dog' ~ *mo lo* 'some dogs' vs. *mo iob* 'a knife' ~ *me iob* 'some knives' (Glennon and Glennon 1994). This reversal cannot be entirely attributed to inherent number semantics, as there is a morphological context in which number marking is identical for both classes.

(iii) In Tübatulabal (Uto-Aztecan), all verbs distinguish between two aspectual stems, the imperfective, which is morphologically simple, and the perfective, which is formed through reduplication of the nucleus of the initial syllable, e.g. *tɨk-* IMPERFECTIVE ~ *ɨ-tɨk* PERFECTIVE 'eat'. In one (semantically heterogeneous) set of 30 verbs, this morphological correlation is reversed, *ɨ-tsɨxk-* IMPERFECTIVE ~ *tsɨxk* PERFECTIVE 'prick'.

(iv) Argument marking in the Neo-Aramaic of Amadiya (Hoberman 1989). Verbs take two series of pronominal suffixes, whose grammatical function switches across stem alternants, e.g. J-stem *qam-mpalt-ax-wa-lu* 'we had removed them' versus P-stem *mpɨlt-ax-wa-lu* 'they had removed us' (n.b. grammatical roles stay constant across these forms).

Neo-Aramaic is especially instructive in that its diachronic development can be reconstructed on the basis of dialect variation. In the more archaic dialects, the J-stem forms have subject and object suffixes, while P-stem forms have only one suffix: a morphological object suffix which marks the subject. P-stem object suffixes were then innovated in some dialects, either by using the J-stem object suffixes, or by polarity, as in Amadiya. That is, Neo-Aramaic allows us to tease apart the two components of polarity: (i) 'when A becomes B under certain conditions' is a morphological mismatch, comparable to deponency (itself fairly infrequent), shared by all the dialects, and (ii) 'B becomes A under the same conditions' is the apodosis which yields polarity. This polarity principle is clearly a *possible* component of morphology; the question remains why it is so seldom applied.