Stable and unstable person features: A structural account

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Person features show an asymmetry in their diachronic development: in demonstrative forms (assuming, e.g. with Harbour 2016, that demonstrative systems are defined by person features), but not in person pronouns or possessives, person features can undergo a reorganisation that leads to diachronically different partitions (i.e. to different organisations of person in the morphosemantics and, consequently, in the paradigm, over time). In this paper, I provide a structural account for this asymmetry. Following Harbour (2016)'s person system and revisiting Polinsky (2018)'s intuition that stability is linked to structural salience, I show that person features are only structurally salient (hence: stable) in person pronouns and in the indexical part of possessives, but not in the indexical part of demonstratives (hence their instability). The discussion is based on Romance data collected from contributions in Ledgeway & Maiden (2016) and from the APiCS; only forms with interpretable and valued person features were considered, thus leaving out all person agreement phenomena, e.g. subject clitics.

Person features do not undergo any reorganisations in person pronouns and possessives: in Romance, such systems are stably ternary, i.e. they contrastively encode three persons (leaving aside number-, gender-, and case-driven morphological variation), both in diachrony (1a, 2a) and in contact (1b, 2b). Differently from person pronouns (1), possessives can be synthetic (2a) or analytic (P + person pronoun, 2b). The analytic shape is very common in Romance-based creoles, but is also widely available in, a.o., French and Brazilian Portuguese:

(1a)	ego /	tu /	*ille* /	nos /	vos /	*illi*	>	eu /	ti /	el /	nós /	vós /	eles	(Latin > Galician)
	1SG	2SG	3SG.M	1PL	2PL	3PL.M		1SG	2SG	3SG.M	1PL	2PL	3PL.M	
(1b)	yo /	vo,	tu,	uste /	ele /	nisos /		vusos,	ustedes /	ilos				(Cavite Chabacano, APiCS)
	1SG	2SG			3SG	1PL		2PL		3PL				
(2a)	meus /	tuus /	suus /	noster /	vester /	suus	>							
	mio /	tuo /	suo /	nostro /	vostro /	loro	(Latin > Italian)							
	POSS.1SG	POSS.2SG	POSS.3SG	POSS.1PL	POSS.2PL	POSS.3PL								
(2b)	pu mwa /	pu twa /	pu lja /	pu nu /	pu usot /	pu sola	(Tayo, APiCS)							
	for 1SG	for 2SG	for 3SG	for 1PL	2PL	3PL								

Contrary to person pronouns and possessives, demonstrative forms (pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs) commonly show a reorganisation of person features. In diachrony, ternary systems can remain stable (L&S16: 882-886), but more frequently evolve into participant-based binary systems (3), or into speaker-based ones (4), with different morphological options as to which forms of the original pronominal/adjectival (3a, 4a) or adverbial (3b, 4b) paradigms are kept:

(3a)	aquest /	*aqueix* /	aquell	>	aquest /	aquell (Catalan, L&S16:886)
	DEM.1	DEM.2	DEM.–1/2		DEM.1/2	DEM. –1/2
(3b)	*aicí* /	aquí /	allí	>	aquí /	allí (Catalan, L&S16:892)
	ADV.1	ADV.2	ADV. –1/2		ADV.1/2	ADV. –1/2
(4a)	este /	ese /	*aquel*	>	este /	ese (Rioplatense Spanish)
	DEM.1	DEM.2	DEM. –1/2		DEM.1	DEM.–1
(4b)	qui /	*costì* /	lì	>	qui /	lì (Tuscan > Standard Italian)
	ADV.1	ADV.2	ADV. –1/2		ADV.1	ADV.–1

To explain these facts, I resort to the person features system proposed by Harbour (2016): two person features (Author, A, and Participant, P), that must each have one value (either + or –) in order to compose with π, the set of discourse-related atoms (speaker, hearer, others), and to partition it. Within this framework, binary systems are derived by the composition of only one

person feature with π: $\pi_{[\pm A]}$ for the speaker-based ones (outcomes in 4) and $\pi_{[\pm P]}$ for the participant-based ones (outcomes in 3). Ternary systems (1,2; source systems in 3,4) are derived by the composition of [±A] with π, the result of which is then composed with [±P]: $\pi_{[\pm P(\pm A)]}$. This is the case for person pronouns (1), directly derived by the composition of person features with π, and thus featurally represented as: $\pi_{[+P(+A)]}$ (1st person) / $\pi_{[+P(-A)]}$ (2nd person) / $\pi_{[-P(\pm A)]}$ (3rd person).

Turning to possessives, I follow Caha (2009) in taking their indexical base (cf. 2a: *mi-*, *tu-*, *etc.*) to be a GEN-marked person pronoun; the (optional) analytic expression of pronominal possession (P + person pronoun, cf. 2b) is the corresponding periphrastic case expression. I integrate this with Řezáč (2008)'s proposal that non-structural Case, such as genitive, is in fact underlyingly a PP. The featural and structural representation for the indexical part of the forms in (2) is therefore: $[_{PP}(P)\ \pi_{[+P(+A)]}]$ (POSS.1), $[_{PP}(P)\ \pi_{[+P(-A)]}]$ (POSS.2), $[_{PP}(P)\ \pi_{[-P(\pm A)]}]$ (POSS.3).

Finally, I take the indexical part of demonstratives to be the result of a two-step functional application, revisiting Harbour 2016. Firstly χ, which, I claim, denotes a set of vectors that originate from a given point in space, applies to π, yielding the vectors that originate from each of the discourse-related atoms *i*, *u*, *o* (and thus their characteristic spaces, or regions). Subsequently, the person features, [±A] and [±P], can apply to π_{χ}, to partition that set of vectors. As a result, the systems in (3, 4) are featurally representable as: (ternary systems, left) $\pi_{\chi_{[+P(+A)]}}$ (close to 1), $\pi_{\chi_{[+P(-A)]}}$ (close to 2), $\pi_{\chi_{[-P(\pm A)]}}$ (far from 1/2); (binary systems, right) $\pi_{\chi_{[+P]}}/\pi_{\chi_{[-P]}}$ (close to/far from 1/2; 3a/b); $\pi_{\chi_{[+A]}}/\pi_{\chi_{[-A]}}$ (close to/far from 1; 4a/b).

Person pronouns and possessives are thus derived in the same way, i.e. by direct composition of [±A] and [±P] with π, while in demonstratives [±A] and [±P] only compose with π via χ. Such a mismatch is supported by the observation that (Romance) pronominal and possessive paradigms systematically instantiate the same tripartition, while demonstrative systems can be ternary, binary or unary: cf. e.g. ternary possessives vs binary demonstratives in Italian (2a vs 4b). Moreover, this structural analysis is compatible with the fact that the person features encoded in person pronouns can control verbal agreement, while those encoded in the indexical part of possessives and demonstratives are invisible to Agree (respectively, because of Case Opacity in inherently Case-marked forms, Řezáč 2008, and the intervention of χ).

The same divide characterises diachronic (in)stability. My proposal to account for the differrent behaviour of person features as encoded in the forms under discussion is that stability is linked to salience and that, within a lattice and action system, the most salient (hence: stable) feature is the first to combine with its hosting head. The link between stability and structural salience is inspired by Polinsky (2018:63ff.), but the specific implementation I propose here hinges on the increased computational complexity of recursive compositions: this results in the most peripheral feature(s) being delinked from the hosting head. Thus, if person features directly compose with π, they are salient, hence not prone to change: this is the case of person pronouns and possessive forms. If, however, the composition of person features with π is mediated by another feature, i.e. if [±A] and [±P] apply to the result of a precedent functional application, they are not structurally salient, hence more prone to change: this is the case of demonstratives, where the composition of [±A] and [±P] with π is mediated by χ. Then, one (or more) person feature(s) can be delinked from π_{χ}, yielding binary (or unary) demonstrative systems.

The featural reorganisations in (3,4) can be partially predicted by markedness considerations. Ternary systems are defined by two features rather than just one, thus marked and possibly unstable: the resulting systems are binary (defined by one feature). The hearer-related domain ('close to 2') is defined by non-uniform feature values (i.e. not combinable in the [±α] type), thus more marked (two different actions have to be performed on π, not just one, reiterated) and possibly unstable: in fact, it either gets the same exponent as the speaker-related one (cf. 3), or is no longer consistently referred to by only one form (cf. 4: it falls in the speaker-related domain or in the other-related one, depending on the position of the hearer w.r.t. the speaker).

However, the actual patterns of featural reorganisation remain unpredictable, as person features are ontologically equivalent operators: the attested variation mirrors this point of undecidability.

References: Caha 2009. *The nanosyntax of case*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Tromsø. | Harbour 2016. *Impossible persons*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. | L&S16 = Ledgeway & Smith 2016. Deixis. In Ledgeway, Maiden (eds), *The Oxford guide to the Romance languages*. Oxford: OUP, 879-896. | Polinsky 2018. *Heritage languages and their speakers*. Cambridge: CUP. | Řezáč 2008. Phi-Agree and Theta-Related Case. In Harbour, Adger, Béjar (eds), *Phi Theory: Phi-Features across Interfaces and Modules*, Oxford: OUP, 83-130.