Syncretism in German Attributive Adjectives: A Distributed Morphology Approach

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In German, the inflection pattern of an attributive adjective (AA) is not a lexical feature as it is for German nouns, but rather, it is dependent on the position within the noun phrase. The gender and case of the modified noun as well as the kind of determiner preceding it condition the inflection of the AA resulting in three main declension patterns, namely strong, weak and mixed inflection. Looking at and comparing the inflectional alternations in paradigms, we find many instances of syncretism (i.e. markers of identical form which express different values of a feature). In this paper, I want to analyze this syncretism in German AA endings, taking a Distributed Morphology approach a la Halle & Marantz (1993). While there have been few attempts to explain intra-paradigmatic syncretism with regard to the weak inflection of AAs (cf. Sternefeld 2006), I have not yet come across an approach which explains the trans-paradigmatic syncretism in German AAs, i.e. syncretism across the inflection patterns. In this paper, I am planning on taking on the latter basing my analysis on one of DM’s core properties, underspecification, while considering morphological operations such as impoverishment and fusion, similar to Müller’s approach (2004) to Russian noun inflection. The goal of this paper is to determine how well the Distributed Morphology approach accounts for the syncretism under investigation.

References
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