Asymmetric variation

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We examine certain odd gaps in the possessive paradigms of nouns in Hungarian. With a singular possessee and first or second person possessor the possessive suffixes have three allomorphs, one with a front unrounded vowel (eg **veːr-ɛm** 'my blood'), one with a front rounded vowel (eg **ʃyn-øm** 'my hedgehog'), and one with a back vowel (eg **kaːr-om** 'my damage'), selected by vowel harmony. With a third person possessor or a plural possessee, the front rounded vowel does not coccur, nevertheless, the possessive suffix has four allomorphs: two front (both unrounded) and two back, with or without a suffix-initial yod in both cases (eg **zyːr-jɛim** 'my troubles', **veːr-ɛim** 'my bloods', **paːr-jɑim** 'my pairs', **kaːr-ɑim** 'my damages').

Some nouns take only back suffixes, others only front ones, but harmonically variable nouns take both front and back suffixes (eg **hotɛl-ɛm % hotɛl-om** 'my hotel'). Similarly, some nouns take only yodful possessive suffixes, some only yodless, and some take both (eg **tor-ɑim % tor-jɑim** 'my wakes'). Nouns in the zone of variation in both respects (harmony and yod) exhibit a variation of all four possessive allomorphs only in the case of a 3pl possessor (eg **hotɛl-yk % hotɛl-uk % hotɛl-jyk % hotɛl-juk** 'their hotel'). In the case of a 3sg possessor the back yodless allomorph is systematically missing (eg **hotɛl-ɛ % hotɛl-jɛ % hotɛl-ja**, but ***hotɛl-ɑ** 'his/her hotel'). This is not a general ban on the possessive allomorph **-ɑ**, because we do find it in harmonically variable stems, if there is no variation in yodfulness (eg **notɛs-ɛ % notɛs-ɑ** 'his/her notebook'). It is also not a dispreference for "too many" allomorphs, since all four are available in case of a 3pl possessor. This situation is unexpected under standard assumptions on how independent (variable) phonological phenomena interact and seems an entirely arbitrary ("unnatural") restriction.

We propose an analysis based on the interaction of constraints of paradigm uniformity expressing analogical support that select the optimal one of the logically possible possessive candidate subparadigms and show that this analysis can explain the seemingly unnatural interaction. The candidates in the analysis are not words, but the combination of one, more than one, all or none of the available affix allomorphs with the relevant stem. These subparadigms are compared to other portions of the paradigm of the given stem and to the paradigms of stems belonging to the same noun class.