

The power of syncretisms: how syncretisms can serve double duty

Fenna Bergsma, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt

Under specific syntactic circumstances, syncretic forms are able to satisfy multiple grammatical requirements: they can serve double duty. In this paper, I show that this follows naturally from an approach that combines having one syntactic node per feature (as in nanosyntax, Starke 2009) with remerging embedded features in a different structure (as in grafting, Van Riemsdijk 2006b). In (1), *was* ‘what’ serves double duty in a free relative construction in German.

- (1) Was du mir gegeben hast, ist prächtig.
 what.NOM/ACC you me given(ACC) have is(NOM) wonderful
 ‘What you have given to me is wonderful.’ (Groos and Van Riemsdijk 1981, p. 212)

In (1), *gegeben hast* ‘have given’ requires accusative case and *ist prächtig* ‘is wonderful’ requires nominative case. Despite these different case requirements, the sentence is grammatical. The form *was* ‘what’ is syncretic between the neuter nominative and the accusative, and is, therefore, able to satisfy both case requirements.

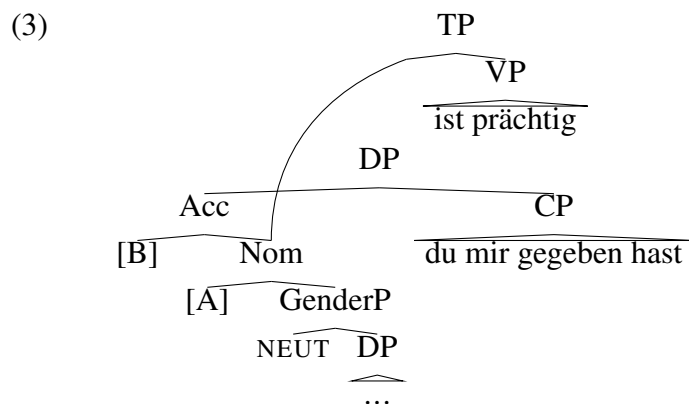
The fact that the syncretic form ‘saves’ the construction (and that an analysis in which *ist prächtig* ‘is wonderful’ takes the whole embedded clause as a subject does not hold) is shown by the ungrammaticality of (2).

- (2) *Wen Gott schwach geschaffen hat, muss klug sein.
 who.ACC God weak shaped has(ACC) must(NOM) smart be
 ‘Whoever God has created weak must be clever.’ (Groos and Van Riemsdijk 1981, p. 177)

Again, both nominative and accusative case is required. As there is no syncretic form for these cases (*wer* is nominative and *wen* is accusative), the sentence is ungrammatical.

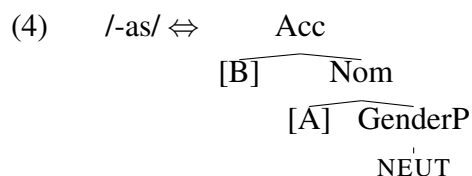
For a form to serve double duty, it is required that there is (i) a specific syntactic structure in which part of the syntax is shared, and (ii) a single form that corresponds to multiple case features.

For (i), I follow Van Riemsdijk’s grafting approach, in which he argues that “a single string of terminal elements can be associated with more than one tree structure” (Van Riemsdijk 2006a, p. 364). I combine the concept of grafting with a nanosyntactic approach, that assumes that each feature corresponds to its own terminal node (Starke 2009), and I adopt Caha’s (2009) universal case hierarchy. As illustrated in (3), particular features are merged into two different structures, with the result that features are structurally shared.



To be more precise, the pronoun with functional structure up to the accusative (Acc) is merged with the verb *geben* ‘to give’. The structure up to the nominative (Nom), which is contained in the accusative, is merged with the predicate *ist prachtig* ‘is wonderful’. The two clauses share the structure up to the nominative.

As for (ii), as is illustrated in (3), each feature corresponds to its own terminal node, and the more complex case is structurally built from the less complex case (i.e. the accusative contains the nominative) (Caha 2009). There is a single form that corresponds to both the syntactic structure up to the nominative (Nom) and the structure up to the accusative (Acc) in (3). This follows from the Superset Principle and the Elsewhere Condition (Starke 2009) in nanosyntax. The lexical entry for */-as/* (from *was*) is given in (4).



The features of the lexical entry in (4) exactly match the features of the syntactic structure up to the accusative (Acc) in (3). The features in the structure up to the nominative (Nom) are contained in the lexical entry in (4) (Superset Principle) and there is no more specific lexical entry (Elsewhere principle). In both cases *-as* is inserted.

In sum, *was* ‘what’ can serve double duty because it has been merged twice (once at the level of its accusative node and once at the nominative level), and the spellout for both these merged structures is identical.

Leaving gender and verbal syncretisms (Pullum and Zwicky 1986) aside, the analysis makes two predictions. First, in agglutinating languages where case containment is morphologically overt (Radkevich 2010), multiple case requirements can be satisfied even without syncretism. Since the containing (e.g. accusative) form morphologically contains the contained (e.g. nominative) form, there is no spellout conflict for the shared element in these languages. Second, the satisfaction of multiple case requirements is caused by syntactic sharing rather than solely by an identical phonological form. Therefore, accidental homophones (i.e. forms that are non-contingent in the case hierarchy) should not satisfy multiple case requirements even though they share the same surface form. I discuss data from free relatives in different languages and other similar constructions, such as Across-the-Board phenomena and Right Node Raising constructions (e.g. in Asarina 2011).

Asarina, Alevtina Alya (2011). “Case in Uyghur and beyond”. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Caha, Pavel (2009). “The nanosyntax of case”. Universitetet i Tromsø.

Groos, Anneke and Henk Van Riemsdijk (1981). “Matching effects in free relatives: A parameter of core grammar”.

In: *Theory of markedness in generative grammar. Proceedings of the 1979 GLOW conference*. Ed. by A. Brandi H. Belletti and L. Rizzi. Pisa: Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore, pp. 171–216.

Pullum, Geoffrey and Arnold Zwicky (1986). “Phonological resolution of syntactic feature conflict”. In: *Language* 62.4, pp. 751–773.

Starke, Michal (2009). “Nanosyntax: A short primer to a new approach to language”. In: *Nordlyd* 36.1, pp. 1–6.

Van Riemsdijk, Henk (2006a). “Free relatives”. In: *The Blackwell companion to syntax*. Ed. by M. Everaert and H. van Riemsdijk. Vol. 2. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 338–382.

Van Riemsdijk, Henk (2006b). “Grafts follow from merge”. In: *Phases of interpretation*. Ed. by M. Frascarelli. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 17–44.