

Constitutive features of declensional classes

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This talk is intended as a contribution to the problem of declensional classes and their constitutive features. The problem, how and by which criteria declensional classes should be divided has been a long-standing issue in morphology. Latest contributions are the ones by Carstairs (1987), Aronoff (1994), Dressler et al. (1996), Beard (Ms.). These classifications (as well as others before them) are based on formal criteria as the sets of inflectional endings in the first place, alternations, stems and gender.

In my contribution I will investigate these features as well as other possible ones. I will show that these classes of features have to be partly divided into further sets of features, such as base form ending or animate and inanimate subgenera. Further other features will be investigated as possible candidates for class-constitutive features.

Usually class assignment is intuitively obvious to the native speakers of a language. It is much harder for linguists to find out, on which basis which nouns have to go into which class. The aim of this paper is therefore to model the knowledge of speakers' productive rules.

The material comes from Slavic languages. The evidence used is the behaviour of words which remain indeclinable in one language, but are declinable in another one, or nouns which remain indeclinable, although they seem to fit all criteria for a certain declensional class. These facts throw some light not only on the problem on which basis nouns are assigned to declensions, but also on the different productivity of declensional classes as well as the features enhancing this productivity.

One major concept for understanding the relation between indeclinability and declensional classes is „systematic indeclinability“. Indeclinability as such is seen as a paradigmatic feature of a noun which prevents its declension independently of syntactic or stylistic context, i.e. a noun possesses all morphological categories usual for this part of speech in a given language, but does not have any means to signalize them and therefore does not belong to any declensional class, e.g. Russian *metro*: G: *ot metro* 'from the underground', D: *k metro* 'to the underground', A: *v metro* 'into the underground', I: *rjadom s metro* 'near the underground', P: *o metro* 'about the underground', Npl: *sovetskie metro* 'the Soviet undergrounds' etc. „Systematic indeclinability“ is then defined as the indeclinability of a class of nouns with identical features, i.e. a certain feature or combination of features prevents all nouns possessing them to enter any existing declensional class.

This is true e.g. in Russian for all nouns ending in /u/, such as *tabu*, *kakadu*, *guru*. All of them are borrowed nouns. In fact, no regular Russian noun ever ends in /u/. (Extragrammatical formations, as abbreviations, may sometimes have such an ending, e.g. *PTU*, but like foreign words, they remain indeclinable). On the other hand, some of these nouns are declinable in Czech (*guru* m. and *kakadu* m., but not *tabu* n.) and nouns in /u/ are generally declinable in Slovene, if they are masculine, as are *guru*, *kakadu* and *tabu*, but not a feminine female name as *Tansu*, although neither in Czech nor in Slovene are there any regular native words with such a base form either. From this I conclude that a canonical base form is a general constitutive feature of Russian declensions, while it is constitutive only for some declensions of Czech and Slovene. In fact, in Czech all declensions accommodating nouns of the masculine-animate subgender allow for non-canonical base-forms, while the neuter classes do not. In Slovene, the productive masculine declension is not sensitive to non-canonical base-

forms, while the productive feminine declension is. This shows on the other hand that in Czech as well as in Slovene gender is a constitutive and more prominent feature of declensional classes than is the phonological makeup of the base form.

In Slovak, (borrowed) male names (e.g. *Papandreu*, and probably masculine-personal nouns in general) ending in /u/ may be declined, while all other nouns in /u/ must not, including masculine-animate ones as *kakadu*. The same was true of words ending in /o/ in 19th century Russian: while male names as *Ariosto*, *Durnovo*, *Michajlo* were still declinable (they have gradually lost this possibility and nowadays are all indeclinable), inanimate masculine nouns, such as *pianino*, *depo*, *bordo* were not (they have changed to the neuter gender in the meantime, but remained indeclinable). This points to the fact that nouns belonging to the masculine-personal gender have better chances to get inflected than words belonging to other genders. Put the other way round: declensional classes for which the masculine-personal gender is constitutive are more productive than others. This is in line with the animacy hierarchy in general.

On the other hand, declensional classes may also exclude animate nouns, i.e. one of their constitutive features may be inanimacy, as the feminine class of *dlaň* in Slovak, which accommodates foreign words as *Provence* or *esej*, but not female names as *Florence* which remain indeclinable. This may seem to be a counterexample to the point made above, but in fact the productivity of this feminine declensional class is lower than of the complementary one accommodating nouns in /a/, and among them animate feminines.

The example of *dlaň* raises another important question: there is no feminine-animate subgender in Slovak. This means that one of the constitutive features of the class *dlaň* would be a semantic feature. The possibility of including non-grammatical features into the set of the constitutive features of declensional classes (e.g. also such features as foreignness as seems necessary for Romani, cp. Bakker 1997) has to be investigated further both empirically and theoretically.

Bibliography

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