The Architecture of Inflection

A general consensus has formed around the rejection, still best articulated by Anderson 1992, of the traditional morpheme, of the idea that words are analyzed into phonological parts and that each part is paired with a meaning. Although differences in execution abound, the replacement, at least for inflectional morphology, involves the creation of a bundle of (morphosyntactic) features and a process by which this bundle can be given a phonological interpretation. Our concern here is with that feature bundle. For Anderson and proponents of Distributed Morphology, it has a syntactic source, albeit a different one; for Stump (2001 et seq), it is associated with a cell in a morphological paradigm. In either case, however, it is derivative. Framed within an analysis of Luiseño, a Uto-Aztecan language of Southern California, this paper treats the feature bundle as an object of investigation in its own right.

The analysis proposes that a Luiseño word, any Luiseño word, contains the same set of five attributes – PERSON, NUMBER, TEMPORALITY, SUBCATEGORIZATION, and FINAL. The first three have to do with the notional properties their labels suggest; the fourth and fifth indicate different aspects of combinatory potential, roughly analogous to what was indicated in Lexical-Functional analyses by  and , respectively. Each attribute is associated with a set of values; words differ in these values.

Critically, only a small subset of the logically possible attribute/value structures is instantiated and, equally important, the members of this subset are not a randomly distributed across the logical possibilities. This conclusion depends on the idea that the attribute/value pairs do not form a simple list; rather, they are part of the structure in 1.

1. \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PER(SON): A} \\
\text{N(UMBER): B} \\
\text{TEMP(ORALITY): C} \\
\text{SUBCAT(EGORIZATION): Q} \\
\text{FIN(AL): X} \\
\end{array}
\] 

The values for PER and N interact to make up a number configuration; the number configuration interacts with the value for TEMP to make up the notional structure. The values for SUBCAT and FIN interact to make up the morphosyntactic structure. Finally, the morphosyntactic structure delimits the options available to the notional structure.

While the attributes required to capture the inflectional properties of Luiseño words will not be unfamiliar, the inflectional properties of other languages may involve a smaller or larger set. The aspect of this analysis that has potentially broader resonance is the separation of notional properties from morphosyntactic properties and the demands that the latter place on the former.