This book is a cross-linguistic typological study of syncretism, which is a situation in which a single form represents two or more morphosyntactic functions. The book could be of interest to those involved in language learning, translating across languages. It is more likely to be of interest to those studying historical linguistics, language typology, or theoretical linguistics.

Chapter 1 defines the concept of syncretism when inflectional categories in a language are not distinguished in form even though one might expect them to be distinguished based on syntactic distinctions that the language makes. For example, the 1PL and 3PL of the German verb *sein* ‘to be’ show syncretism since the same form *sind* is used for the syntactically distinct function of person agreement. The verb-subject agreement of 1SG and 3SG with this verb gives the expectation that 1PL and 3PL would have different forms, but conjugation (1) shows this is not the case.

(1) German *sein* ‘to be’

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<th>German <em>sein</em> ‘to be’</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>infinitive sein</td>
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<tr>
<td>1SG</td>
<td>bin</td>
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<tr>
<td>2SG</td>
<td>Bist</td>
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<td>1PL</td>
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The book has two goals: to explore which grammatical features may be involved in syncretism and the patterns they describe; to determine the distribution of syncretism throughout the world’s languages. The research investigates all instances of syncretism in thirty genetically diverse languages, 1256 instances in total. The selection of languages somewhat follows that used for
the *World Atlas of Language Structures* (Haspelmath, Dryer, Gil, and Comrie 2005). The research also investigates subject marking in intransitive verbs of 111 languages. All the instances of syncretism studied can be investigated online at [http://www.smg.surrey.ac.uk](http://www.smg.surrey.ac.uk).

This book came about from research done to support a certain theoretical framework—Network Morphology (Corbett and Fraser 1993). To develop this theory, research on syncretism in genetically diverse languages was carried out and became the basis of this book.

As used in the research, syncretism includes all instances of inflectional homophony, regardless of how they originated through diachronic processes (either two forms collapsing into one, or two underlying functions merging into one) or how the contrast between the underlying functions and surface realization might be interpreted by the linguist. However, syncretism as used in the study does not include derivational morphology or accidental homophony (such as the neutralization between NOM -o and GEN -a in Russian nouns when unstressed, which is viewed by the authors as a superficial by-product of phonology). Further, the authors looked at cases of syncretism only at the word level, rather than at the morpheme or phoneme level.

Chapter 2 discusses some preliminaries for understanding the typological data of syncretism (in chapter 3) and a formal representation of syncretism (in chapters 4–5).

Chapter 3 looks at syncretism in various features of Indo-European languages, augmented with examples from a few other language families. For each, the possible motivation and origin of the syncretism is discussed, as well as the semantic correlation between the features involved. For case and person syncretism, maps of the location of languages according to the sub-types of syncretism are given on pages 41 and 58, and corresponding lists of languages are given in appendixes 1 and 2.

3.1. In the research sample, syncretism in case is restricted to nominative-accusative or to ergative-absolutive in most non-Indo-European languages, but can be between these and non-core cases in Indo-European languages. Systems with split ergativity can be analyzed as two different patterns of case syncretism, somewhat according to the animacy hierarchy of Silverstein (1976) in that accusative marking is sometimes omitted (zero-marked) low in the hierarchy and the ergative marking is sometimes omitted high in the hierarchy.

3.2. If a language marks its verbs only for subject, then syncretism for subject marking is more common in dual and plural forms than in singular, and is most commonly found between 1st and 2nd person, then between 2nd and 3rd person, and least commonly found between 1st and 3rd person. These patterns parallel those for unbound subject pronouns.

3.3. If a language marks its verbs for both subject and object, then syncretism is most common when the object is 1st or 2nd person. This can be analyzed to follow the animacy hierarchy in that 1st and 2nd person are commonly assumed by linguists to be the most prototypical agents.

3.4. Syncretism for gender distinctions is much more common in dual and plural forms than in singular. Certain semantic groupings emerge such as the combinations of masculine and feminine or feminine and neuter, but not masculine and neuter.
3.5. Syncretism in number nearly always occurs between dual and plural number values, and items lower on the animacy hierarchy usually have fewer number distinctions.

3.6. Syncretism in tense-aspect-mood (TAM) is more common in forms where there is an absence of an affix which is present in other forms.

The interaction between nominal features in thirty languages according to strength of interaction is diagramed on page 117 and the interaction between verbal features in the same languages on page 121. The nominal features of gender and case tend to have more syncretism than number. The verbal features of gender, person, and number tend to have more syncretism than TAM features.

Chapter 4 discusses how syncretism can be formally described and constrained within various theoretical frameworks. Chapter 5 proposes a formal framework for handling syncretism. The models Network Morphology (Corbett and Fraser 1993) and Paradigm Function Morphology (Stump 2001) handle certain syncretic patterns which other models fail to handle adequately. Three case studies are presented to demonstrate how the Network Morphology model successfully handles these challenges.

Comments

The book is written at the level of a 3rd or 4th year linguistic student such as in a beginning Ph.D. program. It is readable in that it adequately defines terminology and well illustrates content with examples. Syncretism in the data is particularly easy to find since a box is drawn around the syncretic words in all charts. The book is written concisely and for the most part unambiguously. Each chapter and many sections in the chapters begin with an introduction and end with a summary. These are quite useful for guiding the reader toward the main points. Although the book is quite technical, the introductions and summaries make the book more digestible to the general linguist.

The book would be useful to historical linguists, language typologists, theoretical linguists, and anyone interested in the phenomenon of syncretism and how it is handled by formal models. As an African descriptive field linguist, I found the discussion interesting at times, especially chapter 3 on the cross-linguistic typology of syncretism, but not so useful for language description or analysis.

Regrettfully, the book only covers a limited number of languages, the majority of which are Indo-European. To be fair, the authors have in fact collected data from a wide distribution of language families, but I would regard their findings on syncretic patterns as tentative relative to making world-wide typological claims. Hopefully, the research will be expanded in the future, as more data is available, to include a more exhaustive list of languages.

References

