Expletive categorical features. A case study of Number marking in Halkomelem Salish

1 The problem. Number marking in Halkomelem (Hk) differs in an interesting way from number marking in English. It displays the following cluster of properties: i) Hk plural marking is optional even in a context where a plural interpretation is forced by the presence of a numeral; plural marking in English is obligatory in this context (1); ii) Hk number agreement is not obligatory (2)-(3), in English it is; iii) Hk allows plural marking inside compounds, English does not (4); iv) Hk allows number marking on verbs, English does not (5); v) Hk does not have pluralia tantum, i.e. nouns which only have a plural form which does not force a plural interpretation, whereas English has such nouns (6); vi) Hk allows plural marking on mass nouns without coercing them into count nouns, whereas English doesn’t (7). This paper shows that the cluster of properties in (i-vi), follows from the assumption that number is not part of the inflectional system in Hk whereas it is in English. In other words, number in Hk is not a grammatical category. Though typologists have long observed that languages differ as to whether number is a grammatical category or not (Mithun 1999, Corbett 2000) it is not obvious how to interpret the absence of a grammatical category within a formal theory of language which seeks explanatory adequacy. The problem is particularly pressing given the common (generative) assumption that languages share the same hierarchical organization of categories (the Universal Base Hypothesis; see e.g. Cinque 1996). If so, then how can we account for the apparent absence of number in Hk?

2 The proposal. The hypothesis I will argue for is that the apparent absence of the grammatical category number in Hk is the result of an expletive categorical feature. This amounts to saying that, along with phonetic and semantic features which yield sound and meaning, respectively, linguistic objects (LO’s) come with categorical features, which yield syntactic structure (i.e. projections). And, just like phonetic and semantic features can be expletive, yielding soundless and meaningless LO’s, respectively, categorical features can be expletive as well yielding syntactically inert LO’s. This amounts to saying that the number feature in Hk does not project and consequently is interpreted as an optional modifier adjoined to the noun (8). In English the categorical feature of Number is not expletive and therefore project to a Numberphrase ((8’); Bernstein 1991, Ritter 1995). It is a consequence of this proposal – as I will show – that non-expletive categorical features create structural positions that must be filled (i.e., have an EPP feature); see (9).

3. Solving the problem. The proposed analysis, derives the empirical differences between English and Hk in the following way. i) Optional plural marking: In English, the EPP associated with Number forces it to be filled. Consequently, the absence of overt marking is interpreted as the presence of an empty morpheme, which in English is associated with a singular interpretation. Consequently, the absence of plural marking is incompatible with the plural numeral. This contrasts with Hk, where Number is not associated with an EPP feature and so doesn’t have to be filled (i.e. is modificational). Therefore the absence of marking is not associated with a singular interpretation and is compatible with the plural numeral. ii) Optional number agreement in Hk is the result of the absence of an EPP feature associated with Number, which is a prerequisite for triggering agreement (Chomsky 2001). iii) Plural marking inside compounds is possible in Hk because plural marked nouns are still projections of the lexical category N and as such can be the input for compounding. In English, plural nouns are projections of the functional category Number which cannot be the source of compounding. iv) Number marking on verbs in Hk is possible because expletive categorical features being syntactically inactive cannot enter into a selectional relation with their complement. v) The absence of pluralia tantum in Hk follows from the fact that semantic expletiveness is dependent on syntactic obligatoriness (the presence of an EPP feature). Optional modifiers cannot be expletive and as such plural marking in Hk must always receive an interpretation. vi) Plural marking on mass nouns is allowed in Hk because only syntactically obligatory number marker serves to quantize nouns (cf. Borer 2004). Hk plural marking does not serve this function. A further consequence of this property is the fact that Hk plural marking implies ‘many’ not just ‘more than one’ and that Hk has a system of “numeral classifiers” for counting.

4 Further predictions. The absence of a number phrase in Hk has the further consequence that English but not Hk allows bare plurals and mass nouns in argument position (10)/(11) (Matthewson 1996). This follows, because in English but not in Hk bare plurals and mass nouns trigger the projection of a Number-phrase, which can by itself function as a predicate or as an argument (Déchaine & Wiltshko 2002). Related to this is the fact that, English but not Hk has indefinite determiners (Matthewson 1996) in predicate and argument position (12). This follows because the sole function of indefinite determiners is to license the empty singular morpheme in Number, which Hk lacks.
(1) te isále si:wi:qe / swíyeqe
  det two man.pl/man
  'the two men'

(2) t'ilém yepl si:wi:qepl
    *This men can sing.
  te si:wi:qept
  *These men can sing.
  yepl swíyeqe
  *This man can sing.
  te swíyeqe
  sing det man

(3) máy-t-es
    help-trans-3erg
  'He/She/They help(s) him/her/them.'

(4) sxéxép'-i:tsel sqwelqwél-xel
    *four-wheels drive
  stripe.pl-back hair.pl-leg
    *teeth-brush
  'chipmunk’ ‘tuft(s) on hair on a horses legs’
    *two-men problem

(5) lhoqw-et
    *wet sthg’
  lholeqw-et
    ‘wet many things’
  s-math’el
    ‘be proud’
  sma:leth’el
    ‘lots of people are proud’
  xáq-lhel-em
    ‘sighing’
  sáqxweqlhalem
    ‘sighing over and over’
    Galloway 1993: 325f.

(6) *trouser-trousers; *scissor scissors

(7) qwlháy - qwéqwelhey
    water - #waters (≠ much water)
  ‘driftwood’ ‘much driftwood’

(8) Halkomelem

(9) Properties of features:

<table>
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<tr>
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(10) tsel kw'ets-lewx *(te) [[si:wi:qe]N]
    1sg.s see-trans-3o det man.pl
    'I saw men.'

(11) tsel kw'etslewx *(te) [qo]N
    1sg.s see-trans-3o det water
    'I saw water.'

(12) a. (*kw’te) [swiyeqe]N te i:mex
det man det walking
  'It’s a man that’s walking.'

b. tsel kw'ets-l-exw [te [swiyeqe]N]D
    1sg.s see-trans-3o det man
    'I saw a/the man.'

I saw [[Num [Num bear-s] [bear]]]
I drank [[Num [Num water] [water]]]