Person–Number Interaction: An Underspecification Approach to Fula

In this talk, I would like to suggest that natural classes in the person system are affected by the interaction with the number system. Specifically, I claim that consideration of the person-number interaction helps understand the placement of the subject marker in Fula, which Stewart and Stump (2007) regard as defying analysis in terms of natural classes. I will show that the natural class defined by [–hearer] is revealed once underspecification is taken into account.

Data and analysis: The challenge comes from what Arnott (1970) calls relative tense in Fula, illustrated below with the past tense active paradigm of the verb *loot* 'wash'.

(1) Fula relative past active

sg	1	lootu-mi	pl	1	excl	min-looti
					incl	lootu-ɗen
	2	lootu-ɗaa		2		lootu-ɗon
	3	'o-looti		3		ɓe-looti

The difficulty is posed by the diverging behavior of the [+speaker, –hearer] category in the singular and plural.

The problem is solved, however, if we assume that the [–hearer] specification is omitted in the first person singular due to its predictability. Note that [+speaker, +singular] is necessarily [–hearer]. The [–hearer] specification, on the other hand, is needed for the first person plural exclusive. The paradigm in (1) is characterized by saying that the subject marker appears as a prefix in the class of [–hearer], but as a suffix elsewhere.

The proposed analysis receives support from the subjunctive paradigm given in (2), which is straightforwardly accounted for by the same statement that the subject marker appears as a prefix in the class of [–hearer], but as a suffix elsewhere.

(2) Fula subjunctive active

sg	1	mi-loota	pl	1	excl	min-loota
					incl	loot-en
	2	loot-aa		2		loot-on
	3	'o-loota		3		ɓe-loota

In this paradigm, there is no complication arising from underspecification of [–hearer]. The first person singular is fully specified as [+speaker, –hearer, +singular], resulting in prefixation of the subject marker. Thus, the analysis in terms of [–hearer] captures the unity shared by the relative tense and subjunctive paradigms.

It is worth noting here that this unity finds an analogue in French stylistic inversion (Kayne and Pollock 1978, 2001), which is licensed in subjunctive clauses and contexts of wh-movement. Fula relative tense is used in contexts of wh-movement. The distribution of subjunctive in Fula overlaps with that of the French counterpart to a significant degree. It is therefore no coincidence that relative tense and subjunctive form a natural class in Fula.

Theoretical implications: The proposed analysis suggests that underspecification based on predictability of feature values is not an automatic process but an option that may or may not be adopted for particular domains of morphosyntax. It is nevertheless a very important factor that must be taken into account when we define natural classes.

The proposed analysis also presents a very powerful argument against the privative feature system for person that only represents positive values (Harley and Ritter 2002). The person system in UG must be able to refer to [–hearer].