

Person features are operations, not predicates

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This talk advances two theses, one empirical, one theoretical, challenging a more-than-fifty-year status quo in research into person. Such work has relied heavily on patterns of syncretism, almost exclusively from pronouns and agreement, as an indicator of natural classes to underpin features and feature semantics. My empirical thesis is that the proper object of investigation is not the syncretism but the partition—the total set of distinctions made by all paradigms collectively within a grammatical domain—and that the grammatical domains relevant to person include not only pronouns and agreement, but spatial deictics, object deictics, and directionals. The basis for this claim is that, whereas, crosslinguistically, every possible person syncretism is attested, partitions are robustly restricted: only five (of a possible 15, 25, or more depending how one counts) are attested and these recur across all the domains just mentioned. Traditional person features, based on predicate logic, cannot easily generate a five-member space and have typically required mid-to-large inventories of three or more features, with consequent overgeneration. My theoretical thesis, by contrast, is that there are only two person features and that these denote operations on the denotation of their complements. Languages can choose, then, from four different subsets of features and, because the operations I posit are noncommutative (unlike conjunction, the semantic glue of traditional predicative person features), languages that activate both features must specify their order of composition. This generates five systems from just two features and I show that these are the five that are actually attested.