Explaining the structure of case paradigms by the mechanisms of Nanosyntax

The Classical Armenian nominal declension

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Abstract This paper looks in detail at the Classical Armenian nominal declension. I highlight several generalizations that can be read off the surface paradigms, including restrictions on syncretism, fusional vs. agglutinative expression of categories and the emergence of unexpected thematic vowels. Subsequently, I explain these generalizations within the framework of Nanosyntax (Starke 2009, 2011).

The defining features of the account are fine-grained syntactic representation (a single feature per syntactic terminal) and phrasal spell-out. I argue that these two tools allow us to replace a separate level of morphological (paradigm specific) structure by a syntactic tree.

1 Introduction

There seems to be a broad consensus in the literature that in order to describe the fine details of morphological paradigms, one needs something in addition to the syntactic structure and the lexicon (for some recent work in the generative tradition, see, e.g., Williams 1981, 1994; McCreight and Chvany 1991; Halle and Marantz 1993; Ackema and Neeleman 2007). The current paper focuses in detail on case declension of Classical Armenian in order to (re-)evaluate the type of evidence usually brought in favor of separate morphological (or more narrowly paradigm) structure. I argue that once syntax is made sufficiently fine-grained, with individual features corresponding to syntactic heads, paradigm structure may be dispensed with.

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