

Contextual syncretism: a model of implicational generalizations

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Crosslinguistic generalizations about syntactic contexts favoring syncretism often have an implicational form. This paper shows that this is expected if (i) morphological paradigms are required to be both as small and as unambiguous as possible and languages may prioritize these requirements differently and (ii) probability distributions for syntactic categories interacting in syncretic patterns are fixed across languages. More specifically, this approach predicts that syntactic contexts that are less probable or more informative about a syntactic category S should favor syncretism of S crosslinguistically. Three case studies are shown to support these predictions, but not the predictions of alternative structural and diachronic approaches.