Homonymy vs. Suppletion: A Riddle
(and how it happens to be solved in ...)

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Imagine a run-of-the-mill flective-type language, L, where nouns inflect for three numbers (singular, dual, and plural) and six cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, locative, dative, and instrumental). Not unexpectedly in this kind of morphology, forms and functions are not in one-to-one correspondence. Assume there is inflectional homonymy between dual and plural in the genitive and locative of all nouns, regardless of declension class. To make matters worse, though this does not come unexpected either, assume one noun of L, N (a very common noun), is suppletive, using one stem, S_1, for both singular and dual and another stem, S_2, for plural, with S_1 and S_2 belonging to different declension classes providing different exponents for genitive/locative plural.

What does N look like in the genitive and locative dual?

To help you see the problem, here is a schematic representation of the inflectional paradigm of N. Paradigm entries that are supposed to be identical due to homonymy and due to suppletion are boxed in by broken and solid lines respectively, with X and Y as those entries where identity requirements overlap.

	Sg	*Du*	*Pl*
Nom			
Acc			
Gen		**X**	
Loc		**Y**	
Dat			
Ins			

As defined, homonymy requires the inflectional exponents of genitive dual and plural, and of locative dual and plural, to be identical. Suppletion requires the dual to share a stem with the singular. How can genitive dual and locative dual meet these two identity requirements at the same time?

It's easy. In the genitive dual and locative dual N takes the stem that is appropriate for singular and dual, i.e. S_1, and adds the genitive plural and locative plural exponents. As specified, suppletion is about the choice of stems, and homonymy about the choice of inflections.

There is a slight problem, though, concerning which inflectional exponents to choose: those appropriate to the declension class of S_1 or of S_2. In the former case the actual exponents of genitive/locative dual and plural wouldn't be formally identical, notwithstanding their categorial identity. In the latter case a stem would be associated with exponents from a declension class other than its own, which seems odd.

What would be your advice to hypothetical L in such a dilemma?

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As it happens, there is a real language that helps you decide whether your advice has been sound.

Let L be Slovene and let N be the noun for 'man, person', whose S_1 and S_2 are *člóvek* (an *o*-stem) and *ljudệ* (essentially an *i*-stem) respectively. Here is the paradigm of this noun, with X and Y for the forms in question:

	Sg	Du	Pl
Nom	člóvek	človẹ́ka	ljudệ
Acc	človẹ́ka	človẹ́ka	ljudî
Gen	človẹ́ka	**X**	ljudí
Loc	človẹ́ku	**Y**	ljudẹ́h
Dat	človẹ́ku	človẹ́koma	ljudệm
Ins	človẹ́kom	človẹ́koma	ljudmí

The genitive and locative plural exponents of *o*-stems are *-ov* and *-ih* respectively.

Now, what is Slovene taking for X and Y? The singular-and-dual stem and its appropriate inflectional exponents, giving *človĕkov* and *človĕkih*? Or this stem and the genitive/locative exponents of *ljudê̦*, however uneasily they go with a noun such as *clóvek*?

Slovene permits the first solution (Svane 1958: 35)— *človĕkov* and *človĕkih*—but it is much happier with another one not yet envisaged. The preferred genitive dual of *člóvek* is *ljudí*, and its preferred locative dual is *ljudĕh* (Svane 1958: 35; Priestly 1993: 401). That is, the requirement that the dual stem be that of the singular can be waived —and preferably is waived—for those cases that require dual and plural inflections to be homonymous. In other words, the homonymy relationship, pertaining to inflections, is extended to full word forms consisting of inflections plus stem, overriding the general suppletive pattern, pertaining to stems, that aligns dual with singular. As a result the pattern of stem suppletion is greatly complicated: instead of being definable in terms of the single inflectional category of number (*člóvek* occurs in the singular and dual but *ljudê̦* in the plural), reference needs now to be made to combinations of the two categories of number and case (*člóvek* in all singular cases and in nominative, accusative, dative, instrumental dual vs. *ljudê* in genitive and locative dual and in all plural cases).

It would be instructive to know whether the preferred Slovene solution is idiosyncratic or urged on the language by general principles. However, analogous dilemmas of homonymy being pitted against suppletion, or inflectional identity against stem identity, are not abundant. Is anyone aware of any?

Presumably the bond between homonymous paradigm entries must be particularly close for this identity relationship to upset a simple pattern of stem suppletion. In instances of accidental, non-systematic homonymies (as characterized in various contributions in Plank 1991a), homonymy-identity is unlikely to prevail over suppletionidentiy. For example, in Slovene *o*-stems the instrumental singular is homonymous with the dative plural, ending in *-om/-em*; other declensions do not share this homonymy (e.g. *i*-stems have instrumental singular *-o* and dative plural *-im/-em*), unlike that of genitive/locative dual and plural, which is characteristic of Slovene case-number inflection in its entirety. The analogous way of meeting that homonymy requirement would be to make the full dative plural form, *ljudê̦m*, do duty also as instrumental singular, just as the genitive and locative plural forms do duty as genitive and locative duals. But this is not something Slovenian feels inclined to in this case.

Incidentally, other paradigms make life easier for Slovenian. When dual stems would align with plural rather than with singular ones, as one almost expects wellbehaved ones to do, dilemmas such as that of *člóvek* would not arise. While there are

no such suppletive alignments, *člóvek* being apparently the only noun with number suppletion, there is a subclass of *o*-stem masculines that extend their stem by *-ov*, and this element is shared by dual and plural rather than by dual and singular. It's easy, therefore, for genitive/locative dual to be homonymous with genitive/locative plural:

	Sg	Du	Pl
Nom	grâd	grad-ôv-a	grad-ôv-i
Acc	grâd	grad-ôv-a	grad-ôv-e
Gen	grâda	**X**	grad-ǫ́v-Ø
Loc	grâdu	**Y**	grad-ôv-ih
Dat	grâdu	grad-ôv-oma	grad-ôv-om
Ins	grâdom	grad-ôv-oma	grad-ôv-i

Of course X is *grad-ǫ́v-Ø* and Y is *grad-ôv-ih* here.

One aspect of the preferred paradigm of *člóvek*/*ljudę̂*, though complicating it considerably, is not unique. The dispreferred paradigm is clearly simpler insofar as the two stems are here distributed in terms of a single categorial distinction (*člóvek*/singular-dual vs. *ljudę̂*/plural), but languages do not shun more complex distributions completely. The present and past tenses of the copula *be* in English, for instance, show equally complex distributions of stems, definable only in terms of combinations of the two inflectional categories involved (number and person)—e.g. *am*/1st person singular vs. *is*/3rd person singular vs. *are*/all plural persons and 2nd person singular:

	Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
1st	am	are	was	were
2nd	are	are	were	were
3rd	is	are	was	were

In the case of English verb inflection there happen to be a good diachronic reasons for 2nd person singular stems to align with the plural (historically, verbal plurals have replaced original singulars, going along with the respective subject pronouns, where *you*

has replaced *thou*), just as in the case of Slovene *člóvek*/*ljudệ* there was the systematic homonymy requirement strongly tying the genitive and locative duals to their corresponding plurals.

What remains to be seen is whether any such distributions of suppletive stems that deviate from the simplest pattern conceivable—i.e. one definable in terms of a single inflectional category—need some special justification. The question of whether there are general constraints on patterns of stem suppletion in inflectional paradigms or anything goes has not received much attention, even in such valuable surveys as that of Mel'čuk (1994). For what it is worth, the examples of stem suppletion in noun inflection that Mel'čuk himself supplies are all simple patterns, with stems (or also 'radical megamorphs') distributed according to either number (including Russian *čelovek*/singular vs. *ljudi*/plural 'person, people'), or case, or possession, but not according to combinations of them.

One possible constraint on less simple patterns might be this: **If a suppletive stem covers one term of an inflectional category only partly and is also used for another term of this category, it must cover this other term completely**.

Assume, for example, a noun with two suppletive stems inflecting for the categories of case and number (as does Slovene *člóvek*/*ljudệ*). According to the constraint suggested, if one of its stems is only used for **some** cases of one number (as are both *člóvek* and *ljudệ* in the dual) and also for another number (as is *člóvek* for the singular and *ljudệ* for the plural), it must be used for **all** cases of that other number (as is *člóvek* in the singular and *ljudê* in the plural). What would be prohibited, on the other hand, is a distribution of suppletive stems as in the following schematic paradigm, with either stem used for both numbers but covering only some cases of each—say, with S_1 used for nominative, accusative, and genitive singular and for nominative plural and with S_2 for dative singular and for accusative, genitive, and dative plural:

	Sg	*Pl*
Nom	S_1	S_1
Acc	S_1	S_2
Gen	S_1	S_2
Dat	S_2	S_2

Neat though this hypothetical paradigm is insofar as identical stems are adjacent in a two-dimensional arrangement (see Plank 1991b on this criterion of paradigmatic well-formedness), I have yet to encounter an actual specimen where suppletive stems are distributed in a comparably irresolute manner.

References

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