

Second order zero in morphology and the case of the Danish imperative

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The paper presents the concept of the morphological zero sign of second order: semantic specification conveyed by the absence of an entire paradigmatic selection. The case used to illustrate the concept is the morphology of the imperative mood in Danish.

In the sign-based approach to morphology the zero sign is defined as a meaningful absence, i.e. as a conveyance of content by means of lack of manifestation of an overt expression component which could alternatively have been selected (Mel'čuk 2006: 469-475; García & Putte 1989; Saussure 1916). The defining properties of this significant “nothing” are thus its association with a particular semantic specification and its oppositional relation to an overtly expressed specification, the classical differential, relational conception of the linguistic sign (Hjelmslev 1969).

In defining linguistic signs through analysis of significant differences, we find zeros “below” sign level with non-zero alternants, i.e. allomorphic zero, e.g. English past participle *cut*, and zeros on the level of individual signs as the morphemic expression of a content specification, e.g. the Spanish singular: *libro-0* ‘book-SG’ (Mel'čuk 2006: 469-516; cf. Haas 1957). However, it is necessary, I shall argue, to acknowledge as a type of zero sign the meaningful absence of a full set of morphemes, the second order zero (Nielsen 2015). The Danish imperative is an example of such a zero (Nielsen in press).

The Danish mood inflection is an opposition between the imperative and the indicative (cf. Heltoft 1998). The imperative verb form consists of the verb stem and the absence of any overt inflectional ending, exemplified here with the stem *spis-* ‘eat’ (1), while all other finite forms have overt desinences (2).

(1) Imperative: *spis* ‘eat!’

(2) a. Present active indicative: *spiser* ‘eat(s)’

b. Present passive indicative: *spises* ‘is eaten’

c. Past active indicative: *spiste* ‘ate’

d. Past passive indicative: *spistes* ‘was eaten’

Two observations can be made from (1) and (2). Firstly, the imperative is formally characterized by the absence of any of the overt endings otherwise available. Secondly, despite the pervasive agglutinative nature of the morphology of Modern Danish (cf. Braunmüller 1989, Heltoft 1998), where morphemes are biunique associations of expression and content, there is no isolatable expression chunk to convey indicative mood. The signal of indicative lies in paradigm articulation, which entails a description of the imperative in terms of absence of articulation. When the tense and voice paradigms are articulated (2), the presence of these paradigms signals indicative mood; when there is no articulation of the paradigms (1), the absence of these paradigms signals imperative mood.

Danish mood selection is a semantic opposition where the lack of selections for tense and voice provides the expression side of the sign with the content ‘imperative’, while the articulation of the tense and voice paradigms constitutes the expression side of the sign with the content ‘indicative’. Thus the Danish imperative is not just a zero in the sense of meaningful absence of an overt mood desinence expressing indicative, but a second order zero: the meaningful absence of (articulation of) the tense and mood paradigms.

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