Do paradigms lie?

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Inflectional paradigms are a rich source of information about aspects of feature structure that might otherwise remain obscure. But they are not to be trusted unreservedly. Morphological forms are the product of competing forces, so any messages we get may be mixed. If it is clues to feature structure one wants, then it pays to be aware of the diversity of paradigms. I describe four types, illustrating them with examples drawn from person and number marking.

1. Paradigms that tell the truth. Cross-linguistically robust patterns that generalize over parochial morphological peculiarities can plausibly be attributed to some aspect of meaning – or features. (Results of typological surveys, and repeated instances of seemingly odd patterns: Tucanoan, Nakh-Daghestatian, Krongo.)

2. Paradigms that talk nonsense. Internally robust patterns that make no sense, but persist as the distorted echo of some prior configuration. (Dhaasanac, Tiwi)

3. Paradigms that tell you what you want to hear. Seemingly meaningful configurations that nevertheless seem to have gotten that way by accident. (Chinantec, Finnish)

4. Paradigms that speak in riddles. Internally robust patterns that make no sense, but seem to reflect some aspect of the features that has not yet been properly described. (Purepecha, Hualapai)