

Person on the edge: What typological gaps tell us about syntactic person restrictions

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In many languages the co-occurrence of pronouns within a clause can be allowed or disallowed depending on their person value (e.g. the equivalent of *I showed you him* is grammatical while *I showed him you* is not). In this talk I present the findings of a large-scale crosslinguistic survey of such syntactic person restrictions, spanning 106 languages from 26 families and 3 isolates and the implications of the findings for syntactic theory. I establish a number of new typological generalizations, including what defines the class of pronouns that are crosslinguistically subject to person restrictions and, more importantly, two previously unnoticed typological gaps. The first typological gap concerns the interaction between the strength of the person restriction (how many pronoun combinations are disallowed) and the domain of the person restrictions (which arguments in the clause are affected by it). The second typological gap concerns the direction of the restriction (which of the two pronouns in a restricted pair is affected by the restriction).

A new analysis of person restrictions is proposed where the pronouns subject to person restrictions start the syntactic derivation unspecified for a person value, getting valued during the derivation. Only phase heads (the syntactic heads that determine the points of spell-out in a syntactic derivation) may provide a value to such pronouns by way of a strictly local syntactic operation: Agree. It is shown that the proposed analysis of person restrictions derives the existence of the two typological gaps established by the survey and also explains why certain patterns of person restrictions are much less frequent than others crosslinguistically. All this is shown to follow from independently needed assumptions concerning syntactic domains, argument structure, syntactic movement, and the timing of grammatical operations.