REVIEW


M. Lynne Murphy
Baylor University
M_Lynne_Murphy@baylor.edu

This book is not an introduction to markedness, but rather a history of the concept and its application by two influential linguists, Roman Jakobson and Noam Chomsky, and their followers. As shown throughout the book, while both theorists used markedness as an explanatory tool in accounting for language structure and acquisition, neither developed a coherent theory of markedness. So with this book, B plays the role of intellectual historian and detective — sorting out what ‘markedness’ has meant in different approaches to language, and what it might mean yet.

The book consists of an introduction and six chapters. The introduction outlines the book and describes how it differs from Battistella’s previous work, Markedness: The Evaluative Superstructure of Language (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). The earlier book serves more as an introduction to the concept of markedness and how it can be utilized in specific subdisciplines of linguistics (especially the study of grammatical categories, phonology, morphology, and language change).

Chapter 1, ‘On Markedness’ (7-18), outlines some of the controversies in the definition and application of markedness and in the interpretation of theories dependent upon markedness. B provides a range of definitions of markedness, noting (following Catherine Chavny) that the notion most basic to ‘markedness’ is ‘informativeness’, but ‘informativeness’ is another useful word without a well-accepted definition. B states that his goals for the remaining chapters are to determine: whether a theory of markedness exists (the answer, it turns out, is ‘not really’) and whether a common core exists among the various incarnations of markedness (the answer: ‘kind of’).

Chapter 2, ‘The Development of Markedness in Jakobson’s Work’ (19-34) traces markedness from Jakobson’s correspondence with Trubetzkoy through his publications in several areas of interest, showing how Jakobson employed or was influenced by notions of markedness in his treatments of Russian morphology, semantic and phonological contrasts, and language acquisition and loss. Here, B reviews several themes in Jakobson’s work, such as iconism between meaning and form, typological and acquisition evidence for universals of markedness (mostly in phonology), and language- and context-specific variations in markedness (in morphology). B notes that at the end of Jakobson’s career, his ‘treatment...
of markedness is neither fully worked out nor wholly consistent, but instead is often speculative, fragmented, and overly broad' (34).

Chapter 3, 'The Heirs of Jakobson' (35-72), surveys the definitions and applications of markedness in the work of a number of theorists, including semiotics, structural linguists, and typologists. The survey is quite dense reading. B's summaries of the works of various authors (including Edna Andrews, Rodney Sangster, Cornelius van Schoonefeld, Michael Shapiro, Henning Andersen, Linda Waugh, Catherine Chavny, Joseph Greenberg, and William Croft) cannot serve as substitutes for reading the originals, but do serve to compare their positions on the definitions of 'markedness', 'reversal', 'assimilation' and so forth. The chapter becomes much less dense and the theorizing about markedness becomes less abstruse when he turns to his own views on the topic. B's view of markedness is empirically-motivated and language-specific in that it strives to 'not be tied to self-justifying principles', but instead 'be grounded in the concrete meaning and the distribution of ... elements' (57). Within those constraints, he reanalyzes markedness, reversal, neutralization, and markedness assimilation with very accessible (and entertaining) examples concerning punctuation, gender-'neutral' language, and personal names. Here, concepts that were murky earlier in the chapter become clear.

Chapter 4 concerns 'Chomsky on Markedness' (73-92), tracing the use of the concept and term from The Sound Pattern of English to the beginnings of Minimalism. While Chomsky appeals to markedness throughout his work, its definition and purpose are never fully explicated and vary throughout, and sometimes within, the various incarnations of Chomskyan generativism. Thus, B takes on the task of cobbling together comments and hints in Chomsky's work, and notes well several points of confusion with regard to markedness in core grammar and periphery. At the end of the chapter, B notes that Optimality Theory may subsume some aspects of markedness and provide new uses for or ways of looking at the concept. The recentness of developments in Optimality understandably prevented (or demotivated) B from having explored this further, but the seeds are here for an interesting turn of events for markedness in linguistic theory.

Chapter 5, 'Departures from the Core' (93-123), discusses a number of other generativists' attempts to account for the sources, nature, and roles of markedness, especially with regard to core grammars and parameters. Early in the chapter, B reviews several works on the nature of core grammar and markedness, including those of Henk van Riemsdijk and Mary-Louise Kean. He then examines specific treatments of markedness with regard to learning and learnability — including Principles and Parameters approaches to first language acquisition. Bickerton's Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (with reference to creoles specifically and acquisition generally), the types of evidence needed in order to acquire marked forms, and approaches to second language learning. A striking problem, noted by B, is the lack of consensus about which forms in a language are marked and which are unmarked, such that different linguists take the same forms or features to be marked and unmarked. This underscores the need for a reliable means for determining whether a construction, rule, or feature is marked. So, rather than
presenting a theory of markedness, the chapter reflects the inconsistent relations between generativists and markedness. B concludes by outlining what a theory of markedness in the generative tradition needs to do, including determining the criteria for diagnosing markedness, identifying and determining the markedness of parameters, indicating the hierarchies or implicational relations among parameters within their language contexts, and specifying the trigger mechanisms for setting parameters.

The final chapter, ‘Jakobson and Chomsky: Bridging Invariance and Variation’ (124-35), B compares Jakobson’s and Chomsky’s intellectual histories and the effects they had on their respective views of and uses for markedness. While concluding that no comprehensive theory of markedness yet exists, B holds that the basic ideas are exciting enough to warrant further development and application. On the broadest view, he does see a common core to the Jakobsonian and Chomskyan approaches, while the specifics of their treatments of markedness are often at cross-purposes.

In a sense, with this book and the earlier Markedness, B acts as a missionary for markedness, noting pessimists’ reactions to the multiplicity of definitions of markedness and the ‘chicken-and-egg’ problem of whether markedness is theoretically primitive (8), but holding that the historical contradictions need not deter people from considering it seriously as a means for understanding and explaining language phenomena. Thus, his mission here is to untangle some of the crossed wires in the history of the concept, and thereby make evident what is useful, what is not, and why it is the way it is in various authors’ works. For the Jakobsonian and Chomskyan traditions he tackles, he does an admirable job of getting to the many hearts of markedness.