

# Motivating a Morphome Albanian Case Syncretism as a Case Study

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**Abstract** This paper discusses case syncretism patterns in Albanian, arguing for an underlyingly syntactic (i.e. functional) motivation for seemingly ‘morphomic’ (i.e. purely formal) metasyncretism patterns in its nominal inflection. It is argued that the distribution of syncretized and non-syncretized forms in the Albanian nominal paradigm is motivated by language economy in such a way that syncretism is used to produce an ‘optimal’ distribution of formally distinct case forms, so that the syncretized forms are always in complementary distribution w. r. t. their syntactic functions, and only the minimal necessary number of morphologically different forms remains in the paradigm. From a purely morphological point of view, this creates seemingly ‘morphomic’ patterns, in which, as a rule, syncretized forms do not form a natural class. However, these particular syncretism patterns are motivated in fact by the underlying functional ‘needs’ (or the lack thereof) of the nominal morphosyntax, so that the distribution of syncretized and non-syncretized forms in the Albanian nominal inflectional paradigm is, in fact, entirely motivated by the division of labour between case and definiteness in the syntax.

**Keywords** Case. Definiteness. Syncretism. Morphome. Morphology-syntax interface. Albanian.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Motivated vs. Morphomic Splits. – 3 Case Study: Albanian Case Syncretism. – 3.1 Evidence for Morphomic Splits – 3.2 Evidence for External Motivation – 4 Conclusion.

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## 1 Introduction

The notion of morphomes, going back to Aronoff (1994), figures prominently in the debates about the autonomous status of morphology and the nature of its interfaces with other modules of grammar, syntax in particular. A morphological pattern is said to be ‘morphomic’ when no explicit motivation for it can be found outside of morphology itself (Corbett 2015; 2016), that is, when its existence cannot be explained away by phonological (e.g. shape of the stem) or semantic conditioning (i.e. feature composition)—what Aronoff (1994) has called “pure morphology”. Although for Aronoff *all* of morphology is ultimately morphomic (i.e. “unnatural”; cf. now also Aronoff 2016), morphomic patterns (or splits, in Corbett’s terms) contrast with (externally) motivated ones, and the issue at hand in much of the literature on morphomes so far is how to distinguish the two kinds of phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

However, it has been observed that the distinction between morphomic and motivated may actually be a more fine-grained one, or a scale rather than a dichotomy (see Smith 2013 and other contributions to that volume; now also Herce 2020). Here, I will present one case study in that vein, with data from Albanian, in which apparently morphomic patterns of case syncretism in noun inflection have been produced in fact by an external (syntactic) motivation. In that sense, I will argue that the Albanian noun inflection is both morphomic *and* motivated at the same time, thus being a curious case of a ‘motivated morphome’ (sic!).

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, the theoretical background, concepts and their definitions are briefly introduced and explained. This is to set out the foundation for our case study, which is detailed in Section 3. Finally, some tentative conclusions are drawn from there in Section 4.

## 2 Motivated Vs. Morphomic Splits

In a discussion of what constitutes a canonical morphome, O’Neill (2011a; 2011b; 2013) gives the following definition for the concept: a “regular distribution of identical form, usually an allomorphic root/stem, which does not correspond to any coherent generalization or function, phonological, semantic or syntactic” (O’Neill 2013, 221 et seq.). As a negative definition, then, the definition of a morphome depends crucially on our understanding of what does constitute a

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the works already referred to here, cf. also the other contributions in Luís, Bermúdez-Otero (2016) for a more recent discussion.

“coherent generalization or function”, that is, what counts as motivation for a morphological pattern. According to Corbett (2016), paradigmatic splits are motivated if they “correspond to morphosemantic, morphosyntactic or phonological specifications” and ultimately “motivation is justified by appeal to a natural class” (Corbett 2016, 85). A morphome (morphomic pattern or morphomic split), therefore, is any regular pattern that does not form a natural class, which is usually defined in terms of featural makeup:

[M]otivation is most easily seen by reference to natural classes in the feature system. In a reasonable feature system, perfective forms versus imperfective constitute natural classes, as do past versus nonpast, singular versus plural, and so on. Motivated segments of a paradigm are sometimes called ‘subparadigms’. By contrast, first-person plural is not a natural class, since it requires reference both to person and to number. Anything beyond natural classes requires an extra step, and so needs additional justification. (Corbett 2015, 163)

A number of such morphomic patterns have been identified in the literature and argued to be psycholinguistically real and diachronically persistent; albeit mostly for Romance languages, following Maiden (2005; see also Maiden 2018 and 2021 for the most recent surveys).<sup>2</sup> One such pattern in Romance verb inflection is the so-called “L-pattern”, identified by Maiden (2018), in which stem allomorphy splits the verbal paradigm in two halves in such a way that only 1SG present indicative and all persons of the subjunctive regularly feature a palatalized allomorph, while all the remaining persons of the present indicative have a non-palatalized stem. Identical forms, in this case allomorphs of the stem, are thus regularly distributed in a way that fails to form a natural class, because neither the combination 1SG.PRS.IND+PRS.SBJV nor PRS.IND minus 1SG qualify as valid subparadigms; they both require an “extra step” to be defined. Interestingly though, in spite of that, this is a stable pattern throughout all of Romance. A subset of examples from Portuguese, with the L-shaped morphomic pattern marked in bold, is reproduced here in Table 1.

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**2** Even when they do discuss the data from outside the Romance family, most of the analyses of morphomic patterns in the literature focus exclusively on single languages or language branches. A wider typological survey has not been undertaken until Herce (2023), where as much as 120 morphomic structures have been identified across the world’s languages, in addition to several important cross-linguistic generalizations on morphomes.

**Table 1** The “L-pattern” in Portuguese verbal inflection (from Maiden 2018, 86)

	1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
PRS.IND	<b>tenho</b> ‘have’	<i>tens</i>	<i>tem</i>	<i>temos</i>	<i>tendes</i>	<i>têm</i>
PRS.SBJV	<b>tenha</b>	<b>tenhas</b>	<b>tenha</b>	<b>tenhamos</b>	<b>tenhais</b>	<b>tenham</b>
PRS.IND	<b>vejo</b> ‘see’	<i>vês</i>	<i>vê</i>	<i>vemos</i>	<i>vedes</i>	<i>vêm</i>
PRS.SBJV	<b>veja</b>	<b>vejas</b>	<b>veja</b>	<b>vejamos</b>	<b>vejaís</b>	<b>vejam</b>
PRS.IND	<b>faço</b> ‘do’	<i>fazes</i>	<i>faz</i>	<i>fazemos</i>	<i>fazeis</i>	<i>fazem</i>
PRS.SBJV	<b>faça</b>	<b>faças</b>	<b>faça</b>	<b> façamos</b>	<b>façais</b>	<b> façam</b>
PRS.IND	<b>venho</b> ‘come’	<i>vens</i>	<i>vem</i>	<i>vimos</i>	<i>vindes</i>	<i>vêm</i>
PRS.SBJV	<b>venha</b>	<b>venhas</b>	<b>venha</b>	<b>venhamos</b>	<b>venhais</b>	<b>venham</b>
PRS.IND	<b>meço</b> ‘measure’	<i>medes</i>	<i>mede</i>	<i>medimos</i>	<i>medis</i>	<i>medem</i>
PRS.SBJV	<b>meça</b>	<b>meças</b>	<b>meça</b>	<b>meçamos</b>	<b>meçais</b>	<b>meçam</b>
PRS.IND	<b>caibo</b> ‘fit’	<i>cabes</i>	<i>cabe</i>	<i>cabemos</i>	<i>cabeis</i>	<i>cabem</i>
PRS.SBJV	<b>caiba</b>	<b>caibas</b>	<b>caiba</b>	<b>caibamos</b>	<b>caibais</b>	<b>caibam</b>

Recently, Round (2015) has identified three kinds of possible morphomic phenomena, termed rhizomorphemes, meromorphemes, and metamorphemes. Rhizomorphemes are morphomic patterns realized at the level of inflectional classes of words, insofar as they are lexically determined, i.e. unmotivated from outside of morphology itself. Meromorphemes are “categories which mediate between morphosyntactic feature structures and the phonological operations by which individual pieces of individual word forms are composed” (Round 2015, 48). Metamorphemes, in turn, are realizations of meromorphemes in specific paradigms which consist of regular patterns of formal identity between pieces of a paradigm (like the L-pattern in Table 1 above), that are similarly unmotivated or “purely morphological”.

In addition to stem allomorphy, another typical instance of a metamorphomic pattern, in the sense of Round (2015), is syncretism. Following the Jakobsonian tradition of featural decomposition of Russian case forms (Jakobson 1962; 1984), syncretism is often represented via feature underspecification (Caha 2019). However, when a syncretism pattern lacks such motivation in terms of featural makeup, as for instance, when it splits the paradigm into unnatural classes,

it has been often used as an evidence that morphological structures are autonomous, even outside of the literature on morphemes (cf. Baerman 2004; Baerman, Brown, Corbett 2005, inter alia). In the following section, I will describe in more detail such apparently metamorphomic patterns of case syncretism in Albanian noun inflection.

### 3 Case Study: Albanian Case Syncretism

In this section, I focus on Modern Standard Albanian (MSA) noun inflection as a case study of an externally motivated (meta)morphomic pattern. First I will argue that MSA syncretism patterns are indeed morphomic, in the sense that they form unnatural classes which cannot be possibly defined in terms of feature composition. Then I will provide a synchronic motivation in the syntax for precisely such a morphomic distribution of Albanian case forms, arguing that the MSA metamorphome under investigation is in fact both motivated and morphomic in the relevant sense.

MSA nouns have three genders which roughly correspond to three inflectional classes in the singular, traditionally termed masculine, feminine and neuter. Masculines (M) take the NOM.SG.DEF suffix *-i* or (phonologically conditioned) *-u*, while feminines (F) have the NOM.SG.DEF in *-a* and neuters (N) in *-t* (with phonologically conditioned variants *-it* and *-të*). Although N is a productive class for deverbal and deadjectival substantivizations with the prepositive article *të* (e.g. *të ardhur-it* ‘arrival’ ← participle *ardhur* ‘to arrive’, *të ftohtë-t* ‘coldness’ ← adjective *i/e ftohtë* ‘cold’), other than those it has lost most of the inherited neuters from Old Albanian, which are inflected as M instead in the modern language (e.g. *vaj-i* ‘oil’, *mish-i* ‘meat’ for the older *vaj-të* and *mish-të* etc.), so it is often said to be in decline (cf. Agalliu 2002; Buchholz, Fiedler 1987; Newmark, Hubbard, Prifti 1982).

MSA has two numbers, singular (SG) and plural (PL). Formation of the plural stems is highly irregular for most nouns and more derivation-like than inflection-like (Bozhoviq 2021, with references therein). All nouns inflect the same in the plural, however, regardless of their gender, taking the same set of case suffixes and the definiteness suffix *-t* (or its phonologically conditioned variants *-it* and *-të*). In addition, in some cases, gender agreement in the plural may differ from the pattern of the corresponding singular noun (as in *shtet-i* ‘state’ vs. *Shtetet e Bashkuar-a* ‘United-F States’), showing that gender is truly an inherent property of the plural stems rather than of lexemes. Therefore, counting SG and PL inflections separately, there are a total of four inflectional classes in MSA, marked traditionally according to the NOM.DEF suffix: M.SG (*-i/u*), F.SG (*-a*), N.SG (*-t*) and a PL (also *-t*) class.

In both the SG and the PL, MSA nouns inflect for case and definiteness. Indefinite forms (INDEF) are unmarked, the definite ones (DEF)

take special suffixes. Nonetheless, due to pervasive mergers throughout the paradigm, the exact number of cases is often debated in the Albanological literature (see e.g. Përnaska 2003). At most four morphologically distinct case forms may be identified, however. These are NOM, ACC, DAT and ABL. MSA noun inflection is summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2** Modern Standard Albanian noun inflection

	M.SG		F.SG		N.SG		PL	
	INDEF	DEF	INDEF	DEF	INDEF	DEF	INDEF	DEF
NOM	-∅	-i/u	-∅	-a	-∅	-t/-it/-të	-∅	-t/-it/-të
ACC		-in/-un		-n/-në				
DAT	-i/u	-it/-ut	-e	-s/-së	-i		-ve	
ABL							-sh	

### 3.1 Evidence for Morphomic Splits

Let us now focus on the patterns of syncretism in Table 2. First, it is obvious that the paradigm is split along the lines of the core/non-core (i.e. structural/inherent) case distinction, while both are syncretic: there are two major mergers in the paradigm, viz. NOM/ACC merger on the one and DAT/ABL merger on the other hand. This is a motivated split, which can have morphomic splits nested inside, according to Corbett (2016). Neither of these two mergers is actually complete, though. ACC is still kept formally distinct from NOM in the M.SG.DEF and F.SG.DEF inflections, by virtue of the ACC.SG.DEF suffix *-n* (and its phonological variants), and the ABL.PL.INDEF form in *-sh* remains the single non-syncretized cell in the entire DAT/ABL subparadigm. In addition to that, NOM.INDEF and ACC.INDEF forms in the M and F classes trigger different case agreement on their agreement probes despite formal identity; cf. the shape of the ezafe-like linker morpheme (LNK) in (1a) and (2a) versus (1b) and (2b), respectively.<sup>3</sup>

- (1) a. *Ky është një djalë i mirë.*  
 this.M be.3SG.PRS a boy.NOM.SG.INDEF LNK good  
 ‘This is a good boy.’

**3** It should be noted that the Albanian linkers themselves represent a closed system with only four forms: *i*, *e*, *të* and *së*, alternating as exponents of the various combinations of gender, number, case and definiteness features. At moments this system seems to make more distinctions than noun inflection does, as in the examples (1) and (2) above, but for the most part linkers are even more underspecified than the corresponding noun forms. No morphomic patterns can be identified, as the shape of the linkers falls out entirely from their feature composition.

- b. *E=pashë*                      *një*    *djalë*                                      **të**    *mirë*.  
3SG.ACC=see.1SG.AOR    a    boy.ACC.SG.INDEF    LNK    good  
'I saw a good boy.'
- (2) a. *Kjo është*                      *një*    *vajzë*                                      **e**    *mirë*.  
this.F be.3SG.PRS    a    girl.NOM.SG.INDEF    LNK    good  
'This is a good girl.'
- b. *E=pashë*                      *një*    *vajzë*                                      **të**    *mirë*.  
3SG.ACC=see.1SG.AOR    a    girl.ACC.SG.INDEF    LNK    good  
'I saw a good girl.'

As regards the noun form, though, *NOM* and *ACC* are both systematical-ly unmarked and regularly merged throughout the indefinite, as well as *N.DEF* and *PL.DEF* paradigms. In other words, *MSA NOM/ACC* merger is a 'metasyncretism' of a kind identified by Williams (1994) as a (meta)pattern pertaining to different paradigms (or in Williams's terms, a metaparadigm). If one agrees with Aronoff (1994, 25) and Corbett (2016, 72) that even single cells may be morphomic, in the sense that, as singletons, both they and the remainder of the paradigm minus that one cell, form unnatural classes, it may be argued that the single non-syncretized cell in this metapattern, viz. the *ACC.SG.DEF* one, is also a morphomic split of a kind, nested within a motivated one.

The other merger, the one of *DAT* and *ABL*, also has an apparent morphomic split nested inside. That is the L-shaped syncretic pattern in *DAT/ABL.PL*. Syncretism here, too, regularly affects *DAT.PL* and *ABL.PL* cells, but with the exclusion of a single cell, viz. *ABL.PL.INDEF* in *-sh*, thus forming unnatural class consisting of *DAT.PL.INDEF*, *DAT.PL.DEF* and *ABL.PL.DEF*, to the exclusion of *ABL.PL.INDEF*.

In addition to this, there is also a formal identity between *DAT/ABL.INDEF* and *NOM.DEF* in the *M.SG* and the *F.SG* inflections. In *M.SG*, both of these forms end in *-i/u*, while in *F.SG* the formal identity is obscured by a phonological change that has affected the original *NOM.SG.DEF* suffix *\*-e* for *F* nouns (still preserved as the corresponding form of the agreeing *LNK* morpheme, as in (2a)) in hiatus formed with the stem-final vowel, coalescing them both into *-a* (cf. Topalli 2009, 207-8). This may seem as a purely accidental syncretism, if only it wasn't fully regular and of a metasyncretic character (i.e. unifying the paradigms of *M.SG* and *F.SG* underlyingly, regardless of the exact surface form of the suffixes that make up the pattern). Needless to say, as a split involving *NOM.DEF* and *DAT/ABL.INDEF*, it forms a very unnatural class.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Compare a similarly odd syncretism involving *GEN.SG* and *NOM.PL*, which was often considered accidental in the literature, but is nonetheless notoriously recurring in

Another possible metasyncretism in the MSA noun inflection in Table 2 could be the one involving N.SG.DEF and PL.DEF, which are both marked with the suffix *-t* (*-it/të*).<sup>5</sup> A connection between N and PL is semantically plausible in Albanian (with N typically covering various abstract and mass nouns). Unifying N.SG and PL (and conversely, M.SG and F.SG) into a single metaparadigm can also be corroborated by the almost mirror-like distribution of forms more generally in the N.SG and PL paradigms on the one, and the M.SG and F.SG paradigms (with distinct ACC and the syncretism of DAT/ABL.INDEF and NOM.DEF) on the other hand. If so, this would be another motivated split, inside which however the aforementioned metasyncretism of DAT/ABL.INDEF and NOM.DEF in the SG metaparadigm is nested as a (minor) morphomic one.

Leaving clearly motivated syncretisms aside, the remaining candidates for morphomic splits in MSA noun inflection that have been discussed so far are summarized visually in Table 3, by shading all the cells that form a particular pattern.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 3** Morphomic patterns in MSA noun inflection

	m.sg		f.sg		n.sg		pl	
	indef	def	indef	def	indef	def	indef	def
nom								
acc								
dat								
abl								

As has already been said, none of the shaded patterns in Table 3 form a natural class. If motivation for a paradigmatic split is understood to mean “reference to natural classes in the feature system” (Corbett 2015; 2016), then the (meta)syncretism patterns in Table 3 cannot be motivated and therefore must be considered morphomic.

different language families and eventually even turns out to be motivated, as shown by Caha (2016; cf. also Caha 2019 and references therein).

<sup>5</sup> Note also that there are Tosk Albanian dialects in which the suffix *-t* is generalized across the PL.DEF inflection (so that DAT/ABL.PL.DEF has the desinence *-vet*), and the inherited neuters such as *vaj-të*, *mish-të* etc. are also better preserved there (cf. Çerçja 2017 for an overview).

<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, given the all-pervading mergers in MSA noun inflection, one could say that motivated syncretisms are shown in Table 3 as well, only by lack of any specific shading. This is actually significant for fully comprehending the nature of MSA system of inflection: it is truly a ‘(meta)system of syncretisms’, as will be discussed in what follows shortly (§ 3.2).



### 3.2 Evidence for External Motivation

While it is true that the paradigmatic splits in Table 3 are unnatural, it has been argued elsewhere (cf. Božović 2021), however, that MSA case syncretisms of the kind shown in Table 3 are not just “purely formal”, in the sense that they actually play a role at the morphology-syntax interface.

Namely, it should be noted that the morphomic distributions in MSA noun inflection are a product of a specific interaction of two categories, viz. case and definiteness. Both case and definiteness are categories of contextual (i.e. required by the syntax, as per Booij 1994; 1996) inflection in MSA. This may be seen in the following examples (3-4).

- (3) a. *Vajz-a*            *është*            *e*            *mençur.*  
 girl-NOM.SG.DEF be.3SG.PRS LNK smart  
 ‘(A/the) girl is smart.’
- b. \**Vajzë*            *është*            *e*            *mençur.*  
 girl.INDEF be.3SG.PRS LNK smart
- (4) a. *Vjollc-a*            *është*            *studente.*  
 Vjollca-NOM.SG.DEF be.3SG.PRS student-F.SG.INDEF  
 ‘Vjollca [a female personal name] is a student.’
- b. \**Vjollc-a*            *është*            *student-ja.*  
 Vjollca-NOM.SG.DEF be.3SG.PRS student-F.SG.DEF

A subject NP has to be definite in addition to bearing the NOM case, as in (3a) vs. (3b), and this is true for both common and proper nouns, for which cf. (4), i.e. regardless of their inherent semantics, showing that definiteness in MSA is truly a category of contextual (that is to say, bound to marking syntactic relations) rather than inherent inflection. Therefore, in principle, a morphologically definite form in MSA may be ambiguous with respect to the referential or non-referential readings, as is also shown by the English translation of (3a).<sup>7</sup> A predicative NP, on the other hand, has to be indefinite; cf. (4a) vs. (4b). Now compare this with the ACC forms marking various kinds of objects in (5-7).

- (5) a. *(E=)kam*            *punë-n*            *e*            *rëndë.*  
 3SG.ACC=have.1SG.PRS work-ACC.SG.DEF LNK heavy  
 ‘I have a lot of work to do.’

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed contrastive study of noun definiteness in Albanian and English, cf. Backus Borshi (2015).

- b. \*(E=)kam                      punë              të              rëndë.  
3SG.ACC=have.1SG.PRS    work-INDEF    LNK            heavy
- (6) a. A ke                      uri?  
Q have.2SG.PRS    hunger-ACC.SG.INDEF  
'Are you hungry?'
- b. \*A ke                      uri-në?  
Q have.2SG.PRS    hunger-ACC.SG.DEF
- (7) a. Jetoj                      në Evropë                      (Jugor-e).  
live.1SG.PRS    in Europe-ACC.SG.INDEF    Southern-F  
'I live in (Southern) Europe.'
- b. Jetoj                      në Evropë-n                      \*(Jugor-e).  
be.1SG.PRS    from Europe-ACC.SG.DEF    Southern-F

While here it is possible in principle to have either a definite or an indefinite object phrase, depending on its semantics and pragmatics, specific syntactic configurations, such as those involving optionality vs. obligatoriness of object clitic doubling (5), certain phraseological constructions (6), various noun modification strategies and prepositions governing the ACC (7), actually systematically disallow one of the options. In other words, there is a specific division of labour between case and definiteness, making use of this additional distinction provided by the morphology in order to signal some of the syntactic relations in the functional domain of cases, which in turn reduces the overall number of necessary distinct forms in the (singular) metaparadigm to just three: two of them marked, non-syncretic ones, viz. NOM.DEF (for marking subjects) and ACC.DEF (for objects made either semantically or pragmatically specific), and the third 'elsewhere' (i.e. syncretic) form.

This similarly holds true for the DAT/ABL merger, as well. The only syntactic position in which DAT (typically marking indirect objects) and ABL (typically marking complements of various prepositions) systematically contrast with each other (only this time in the PL paradigm) is that of a modifier/complement of a DEF VS. INDEF head noun; cf. (8-9).

- (8) a. dru                      lisa-sh  
tree.INDEF    oaks-ABL.PL.INDEF  
'oak tree(s)'
- b. \*drur-i                      lisa-sh  
tree-DEF    oaks-ABL.PL.INDEF

- (9) a. *drur-i i lisa-ve qindra-vjeçare*  
 tree-DEF LNK oaks-DAT/ABL.PL.DEF hundred-year olds  
 ‘the tree of the hundred-year-old oaks’
- b. *dru i lisa-ve*  
 tree.INDEF LNK oaks-DAT/ABL.PL.DEF  
 ‘oak tree [e.g. as a material]’

While the syncretic DAT/ABL modifier (with a linker) can combine with both an INDEF and a DEF head noun in different syntactic configurations, as in (9), the non-syncretic ABL.INDEF is reserved for INDEF contexts only (8a) and cannot modify a DEF noun (8b). Here too, a division of labour between case and definiteness has worked to produce a reduced number of distinct forms, delegating some of the functions of cases to the distinction in definiteness, resulting thus in an L-shaped morphomic (meta)paradigm, with just two distinct forms: a single non-syncretized ABL.PL.INDEF one, and an ‘elsewhere’ one, oblivious as regards the case, but contrasting in definiteness/specificity.

According to Božović (2021), the division of labour between case and definiteness in MSA has led thus to a specific complementary distribution of the syncretized and non-syncretized forms with respect to their syntactic functions. Namely, forms such as ACC.SG.DEF and ABL.PL.INDEF are kept formally distinct only in (morpho)syntactically ambiguous contexts, as in (5a), where the object clitic is syntactically optional, in (7) with an overt modifier, or in (8a) and (9b), with an INDEF head noun. Only in such contexts, the case/definiteness distinction has to be formally maintained, because it remains the only overt signal of a syntactic relation. If there is, however, any other strategy of syntactic function coding available, such as the obligatory object clitic doubling in (5b), a phraseologically fixed VO construction as in (6), and the like, then the noun (viz. NP) need not mark a case distinction overtly; instead, it can revert to the syncretic ‘elsewhere’ form, and thus maintain a laudably high level of language economy.

This equally holds true for the motivated as well as morphomic mergers in MSA. Crucially, however, it is precisely this kind of merging forms that are in complementary syntactic distribution, so as to reduce the number of necessary distinct forms to an ‘optimal’ minimum, that as an effect produces in turn unnatural classes of the kind we have observed in Section 3.1 above. Recall, for instance, the DAT/ABL.SG.INDEF+NOM.SG.DEF morphome. There is not a single syntactic context in which the exponents of these values would ever compete for the same position. This is, however, exactly what allows them to formally syncretize, as instead of having to mark all the relevant contrasts formally on the noun, speakers can rely on the specific syntactic configurations to distinguish the necessary functions. In return, the necessary number of distinct inflectional forms is maximally

reduced, but the resulting distribution of identical forms within a paradigm necessarily produces unnatural classes, i.e. morphomic splits. In that sense, the incomplete mergers of NOM/ACC and DAT/ABL in MSA, as well as the apparent formal identity of DAT/ABL.SG.INDEF and NOM.SG.DEF, are disturbingly both relevantly morphomic *and* motivated by language economy.

#### 4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the distribution of syncretized and non-syncretized forms in Albanian noun inflection is motivated by mechanisms of language economy, driven by the division of labour between case and definiteness in the syntax, in such a way that syncretism is used as a means to produce an ‘optimal’ (that is, maximally economical) distribution of formally distinct case/definiteness forms for each (sub)paradigm. In turn, this creates several metamorphomic patterns, in which, as a rule, syncretized forms never make up a natural class (e.g. NOM and ACC, but with the exception of ACC.SG.DEF, or DAT and ABL with the exception of ABL.PL.INDEF, or a rather strange merger of DAT/ABL.SG.INDEF and NOM.SG.DEF).

In other words, it is precisely the morphome that, far from being “useless” and “arguably increas[ing] the complexity of the system with no obvious corresponding return” (Corbett 2016, 64), actually plays a crucial role in the organization of forms in the language. In that way, Albanian noun inflection, with its pervasive case syncretisms, features non-trivial splits that are both morphomic *and* (externally) motivated at the same time.

It is important to note that syncretism, as a means of maintaining this maximal economy, could not work this way if it did *not* produce unnatural classes, such as those discussed here; in that case, its power to maximally economically organize the system of forms would be significantly reduced, if not lost. This is why, in the end, *morphomic* (in the sense of forming an unnatural class) and (externally) *motivated* should not be understood as a total dichotomy: here we have seen that, in the case of Albanian case syncretism, a syntactic (functional) drift may actually feed and itself rely on morphomic distributions of forms.

The analysis provided here for Albanian, therefore, may contribute to the ‘morphome debate’ in morphology, which is still almost exclusively dominated by the data from Romance, and to a better understanding of the morphology-syntax interface in general, as well as to the literature on (meta)syncretism patterns and the morphosyntax of the Balkan Sprachbund noun phrase in particular.

On a final (side) note, it was already pointed out by Newmark (1962), some sixty years ago, that the Albanian case system is in fact

a “combinatorial” one, in which case and definiteness interact so as to reduce the number of necessary distinct forms; in what was essentially a proto-derivational account<sup>8</sup> of inflection:

In traditional descriptions of Albanian the essential simplicity of the case system is obscured by mixing together information about the morphological structure, the syntactic distribution, and the semantic functioning of the case form. By treating these aspects of linguistic structure separately but in relation to one another, a combinatorial description may reveal underlying regularities of structure in each aspect, without sacrificing a view of the complex integrity of the language itself. (Newmark 1962, 321)

In so many aspects this short article resonates with the present issues.

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<sup>8</sup> As such, Newmark’s analysis represents an important early alternative to the Jakobsonian feature-based decompositional approach to case syncretism, which has had a significant influence on later researchers. Sadly, this paper has remained practically unknown.

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