Oblique case morphology, syncretism, and gender sensitive syntax in (Swiss) German

Two related problems: First, German (singular) dative and genitive case morphology is traditionally described as exhibiting the syncretism pattern in (1), with three exponents for six paradigm cells, whereas in the nominative and accusative three genders are overtly distinguished. Secondly, the forms in (1) are the object of several unexpected positional contrasts ((A)-(D) below). No two forms have exactly the same positional distribution. However, there is a strict form-position correlation, e.g. -r has one positional distribution (distinct from that of -m, and that of -s), whether it occurs as genitive or as dative marker.

Proposal: I propose a unified solution to the two problems. The cluster of properties suggests that - rather than six morphemes and syncretism, and extra-syntactic exceptions - there is only one morpheme, whose syntactic position/domain is determined by [+feminine], or elsewhere by Case (dative and genitive), and whose contextual allomorphs are -s, -m, and -r.

Four surprising asymmetries: There are the following four positional contrasts between the oblique feminine -r and its non-feminine counterparts. They have previously been analyzed as non-syntactic or as “true exceptions,” but have crucially not been related to one another.

(A) Two adjectives modifying the same noun within one noun phrase generally exhibit Parallel Inflection. There is one exception, namely in masculine/neuter dative contexts (Milner and Milner 1972, Plank 1992, Müller 2002, Sternefeld 2004, Gallmann 2004, Roehrs 2007). Compare the distribution of the masculine/neuter form -m, optionally violating Parallel Inflection, and the feminine form -r in (2). In the literature this contrast is analyzed as non-syntactic (often phonological).

(B) The dative forms of the Swiss German indefinite article (3) have three morphemes: a stem an, an invariant ending in, and a dative marker: anm for masculine/neuter and ar for feminine. While the ar remains to the right of the stem an, the am surfaces to the left of an (3). I will show that the proposals for (2a) in the literature cannot extend to (3), despite the resemblance of the facts.

(C) The contrast in (3) can also be observed in possessive pronouns. The forms in (4) have a stem -i-. A person morpheme precedes the stem, an agreement morpheme (here -s-) follows the stem. In the third person there is yet another morpheme, a dative marker which reflects the Gender of the possessor (5): whereas the (optional) masculine/neuter anm precedes the stem (and the reflexive s-), the feminine ar follows the stem.

(D) Feminine -r (and also dative -m) contrasts positionally with its masculine/neuter counterpart in the genitive (6) vs. (7). In fact, the distribution of genitive -s contains a “true exception” in that it is the only form of the definite determiner paradigm that is not identical to its counterpart in the strong adjectival inflection paradigm (7) (Bierwisch 1967, Roehrs 2006). Again, the syncretic masculine/neuter form -s is linearized in a higher domain than its feminine counterpart. We arrive at the syntactic hierarchy -s < -m < -r.

I propose that these four asymmetries are surface reflexes of the same underlying phenomenon. The form-syntax correlation, the positional contrasts, the syncretism pattern, and the alleged exceptional behavior of the oblique case forms -s, -m, and -r can be captured by analyzing them as one morpheme, a possessor clitic (5) with a second position property and three contextual allomorphs.

Conclusion: There is strong evidence that the four gender sensitive asymmetries (A)-(D) are related and that the unified basis for these contrasts is syntactic. Given the necessity of this syntactic hierarchy, the morphological distinctions should and can be made to follow from the syntax. If so, (Swiss) German has one single oblique case marker morpheme, and (UG requires) an intricate dative and genitive syntax.
Dative and Genitive case marker exponents in German (singular DPs):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MASCULINE</th>
<th>NEUTER</th>
<th>FEMININE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAT</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>m</td>
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<td>GEN</td>
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(2) a. MASCULINE:
mit gut-\textbf{em} frisch-\textbf{em}/-\textbf{en} Tee
with good-DAT fresh-DAT/-WEAK tea

b. FEMININE:
mit gut-\textbf{er} frisch-\textbf{er}/*-\textbf{en} Milch
with good-DAT fresh-DAT/-WEAK milk

(3) a. uf \textbf{om} -\textbf{on}- \textbf{t}_m -\textbf{ä} bärg\textsubscript{mas} \textit{(on a mountain)}
Swiss German

b. uf -\textbf{on} -\textbf{ør} -\textbf{ä} bluäm\textsubscript{fem} \textit{(on a flower)}
on DAT STEM DAT AGRA N

(4) m-i-s / d-i-s / (im) s-i-s / i-r-ös piär
my your (him) self’s her beer

Swiss German

(5) (im) s- i- \textbf{t}_m -s piär \textit{(his beer)}
Swiss German

i- -\textbf{r} -ös piär \textit{(her beer)}

(DAT) PERS STEM DAT AGRA beer

(6) FEMININE (Dative = Genitive)
a. wegen d-\textbf{er} gut-\textbf{en} Sicht
because.of the-GEN/DAT good-WK
German

b. wegen gut -\textbf{er} / -*-\textbf{en} Sicht
because.of good -GEN/DAT / -WK

(7) MASCULINE/NEUTER
a. wegen d-\textbf{es} gut-\textbf{en} Wetter-s
because.of the-GEN good-WK
German

b. wegen gut *-\textbf{es} / -\textbf{en} Wetter-s
because.of good -GEN / -WK
weather-GEN