A possible restriction on inflection is the No Blur Principle (NBP)/Vocabular Clarity (VC) approach (Carstairs-McCarthy 1994, 2010 and elsewhere). The principle is based on an analogy between affixal and lexical meaning. Simplified, the idea is that affixal behaviour is restricted in a way that complies with restrictions on lexical semantics. There can be no more than one ‘class-default’ affix, i.e., no more than one affix that signals a particular morphosyntactic value (e.g. past tense) without also signalling inflection class. If there were more than one default, they’d be analogous to exact synonymy, which is surely rare and possibly non-existent in the lexicon. This approach has been useful in the study of Romance (e.g. Maiden 2009) and Scandinavian (Enger 2007), but it is controversial; Müller (2007) argues that Icelandic noun declensions are problematic for the NBP.

In reply, Carstairs-McCarthy (2010: 231) suggests treating Icelandic plural and singular as distinct ‘vocabulary domains’; they therefore do not count as exact synonyms. Yet why would we treat Icelandic plural and singular as distinct vocabulary domains – except for the obvious reason that the NBP or VC then fares better? On the other hand, Carstairs-McCarthy’s proposal is unlike setting up one vocabulary domain consisting of, say, the nominative and genitive singular + the dative and accusative plural and another consisting of the dative and accusative singular + the nominative and genitive plural. In that case, each domain would have been constructed arbitrarily, with no independent motivation. By contrast, a domain consisting of all and only singular cases is not constructed arbitrarily: a singular vs. plural split is not too contrived. And indeed, this is the only state of affairs attested.

We shall look at the next language down the road, Faroese. I shall argue that, despite the impression we may get from the Faroese reference grammar (Thráinsson et al. 2004), Faroese declensions they do not constitute counter-examples to the NBP/VC. I shall also present some arguments why the NBP/VC approach, though clearly anchored in a more ‘generative’ way of thinking, might have some appeal for cognitive linguists.

References