

LEVERHULME FUNDED PROJECT

Ronnie Cann, Major Research Fellowship

Project startdate: September 2007

The dynamics of case: an inferential approach to morphological case-marking

Morphological case marking fulfills a wide range of different functions both within and across languages, including at least:

- a) marking grammatical relations;
- b) satisfying the selectional properties of some functor;
- c) signifying a dependency on some expression;
- d) modifying the aspectual or other properties of a predicate phrase;
- e) indicating the definiteness (or quantity) of a noun phrase;
- f) signaling a semantic relation between a noun phrase and some other expression;
- g) signaling some pragmatic property, such as information structure or relative animacy.

Given the amount written on case and case systems in the descriptive, typological and generative linguistic traditions, it may seem that the phenomena are well understood. Theoretical accounts from a cross-linguistic perspective are, however, partial, typically only covering syntactic uses (a-c). Even those frameworks that discuss other uses, such as semantic ones (f,g), nevertheless treat case as a non-homogeneous phenomenon, minimally requiring a distinction between structural and semantic (independent) uses of case, with a distinction often also made between structural and selected (lexical or inherent) case.¹

There are, however, strong reasons for wanting a unified theory of case, despite the apparent unconnectedness of many of the functions it performs. One reason to reject the dichotomy between structural and semantic case (as in Localist theories) is that the different instantiations are not entirely independent. For example, the 'ethical' (benefactive) dative in the German example in (1) intuitively bears some semantic relation to the dative in (2) selected by the verb *geben*, as some loosely defined 'goal'. The accusative pronoun is not acceptable here.

- 1) Er goß ihr die Pflanzen.
 he.nom watered her.dat the.acc plants
 'He watered the plants for her.'
- 2) Er gab ihr die Planzen
 he.nom gave her.dat the.acc plants
 'He gave her the plants'

In addition to such concerns, there are the interactions of case with aspect, definiteness and partiality as exhibited in languages like Finnish and Estonian where alternations in structural cases (partitive, and genitive/nominative) signal semantic information. Indeed, it seems to be true that the information conveyed by a case-ending depends strongly on linguistic, and possibly non-linguistic, context.

One of the reasons that the dichotomy between semantic and syntactic uses of case persists is that, following the classical tradition, case is typically treated as something determined by properties of the predicate (verb, adjective, noun or preposition) with which a case-marked term is associated. Hence, we have the concept of Case Assignment within various models of transformational grammar whereby case is assigned under some configuration depending on the categorial

1 See Butt 2006 for a useful and extensive discussion of theoretical approaches to case.

properties of a 'governing expression'. Within HPSG, case is a feature associated with the head that must unify with some case value on a complement or subject (Heinz and Matiassek 1994). And we find similar assumptions made elsewhere. Even the more sophisticated theories that link case (more or less abstractly construed) with argument structure, exemplified especially in LFG, RRG and the work of Kiparsky, still take the predicate as basic and the realisation of case as merely resulting from the semantic and argument structure properties of the predicate.

An exception to the assumption that case is a passive marker of dependency is found in Nordlinger (1998) which suggests that case marking may construct its own syntactic context, independently of the predicate. Thus, ergative case-marking (for a strict ergative language like Wambaya) is associated with information which specifies that the case-marked element is a subject and that there is an object in the clause. Semantic case is also treated in a similar way in that, e.g., a Locative marker projects the information that it marks an adjunct and encodes a semantic locative relation between some element and whatever is denoted by the nominal stem. The theory thus encompasses a more unified view of case-marking but, nevertheless, implies that there is a typological distinction between languages where case projects structure (non-configurational) and those that do not (configurational). A more unified view of case in the Australian languages is achieved only by abandoning a universal cross-linguistic characterisation of the phenomenon.

By taking the perspective of the predicate, rather than the case-marked term, theories fail to take into account the fact that the precise function of a case-marked term is dependent on its linguistic context. This may be related to the properties provided by a predicate, but is not restricted to these: factors such as the animacy, number or countability of the case-marked term may play a part as well as the appearance of adjuncts within the clause or even linear order (e.g. nominative case in Modern, and Classical, Greek may identify a Topic function preverbally but not postverbally). In addition, a single instance of a case-marker on some expression may signal more than one function at a time (e.g. partitive case may signal both Direct Object function and imperfective aspect in Finnish).

The present research proposal puts forward the hypothesis that taking the perspective of the case-marked term, rather than the predicate, and taking seriously its context-dependence, can lead to new insights into case as a linguistic phenomenon. Of course, within any theory of syntax that defines grammaticality in terms of constraints on decontextualised representations of syntactic structure, whether or not one considers the predicate of the case-marked term as primary is not significant. However, if one takes a dynamic (parsing-oriented) view of the syntactic process, this distinction becomes significant and case-marking is to be treated as signalling possible ways in which the information carried by the case-marked term is to be embedded into the interpretation of the clause. The principal hypothesis of the current research proposal is that case-marking does not project truth-conditional or structural information per se, but provides procedural information, giving instructions on how the function of the case-marked term is to be construed in the current utterance. Case-marking is thus construed as projecting underspecified information about the function of the case-marked term within the developing interpretation of a string. Depending on information available at the point at which the case-marked term is parsed, it may be construed as fulfilling as specific grammatical function, satisfying the properties of a predicate, projecting a semantic adjunct or relation or some combination of these or it may provide information about the predicate on which it will depend. The research will furthermore pursue the idea that case-marking is in essence semantic, albeit in an underspecified sense and will attempt to analyse what may be considered 'proto-'case-meanings along the lines developed for thematic roles in Dowty (1990). In this way, I hope to provide a principled way of analysing how the meaning of a case-marking interacts with the meaning of its nominal host and the thematic roles associated with any governing predicate.

The theoretical framework to be used is that of Dynamic Syntax (Kempson et al. 2001, Cann et al. 2005). The left-to-right dynamics of this system and its ability to make reference to context, both structural and otherwise, make it the ideal grammatical formalism to explore the various uses of case-marking. Its flexibility in allowing reference to pragmatic, as well as semantic and morphosyntactic information, opens up the possibility of having a unified account of the phenomena noted above. The research will also explore the properties of case-marking systems themselves, in particular: the crosslinguistic significance of the core - periphery distinction; the extent to which it is necessary to differentiate ergative/absolutive from nominative/accusative morphological systems in terms of the range and types of function that cases perform; and the relation between syncretic forms and the functions performed by the paradigmatic cases they encode (e.g. how syncretism affects case matching and mismatching in relative clause constructions, etc.).

The principal questions to be addressed by this research are:

- how does linguistic (and non-linguistic) context affect the interpretation of a case-marked term?
- what procedural information does case-marking provide?
- can a unified account be given of the functions of case in general by taking case-marking seriously?
- to what extent are generalisations about case-marking in one language cross-linguistically valid?

References

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