Case theory

Introduction to Syntax, EGG Summer School 2017

András Bárány
ab155@soas.ac.uk

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Overview

Where we left off...

Where does Case come from?

Other aspects of case

Where we left off...

Merge and argument structure

We have seen that the theta criterion, c- and s-selection can rule out structures like in (1)

(1) a. *John loves Mary Paul.

b. *Milena says.

But there are other ungrammatical structures that involve the right categories:

(2) a. *She loves she.

b. *Her loves her.

c. *Her loves she.

- The problem here is case.
- Today we'll look at case in English and its relation to arguments.
- Today's slides are based on Koeneman & Zeijlstra (2017: §4)

Morphological case

English does not have rich case morphology

- only (animate) personal pronouns have distinct case forms

(3) a. *I* (NOM) *me* (ACC) b. *he* (NOM) *him* (ACC) c. *she* (NOM) *her* (ACC)

Some other languages, e.g. Hungarian, are obviously different...

(4) *A lány lát egy kutyá-t.*
the girl see.3SG a dog-ACC
'The girl sees a dog.'

Case and arguments

In languages with morphological case, there are certain mappings of case to arguments

- In many languages, subjects are NOM and objects are ACC
- This is why the sentences in (5a–c) ungrammatical

(5) a. *She loves she.

b. *Her loves her.

c. *Her loves she.

d. She loves her.

? Can we link case to other things, maybe theta roles?

Case and arguments II

It might be tempting to link AGENT with NOM, and PATIENT/THEME with ACC

? But what about (6) and (7)?

(6) She was loved.

(7) a. I believe her to be happy.

b. I believe that she is happy.

? What's happening here? Where is case coming from?
? Which semantic roles are assigned to what?

In English, we see morphological case on pronouns. But it has been argued that the distribution of NPs is restricted by case even if we do not see it: this is abstract Case. Case theory therefore also restricts what kinds of sentences our syntactic theory generates.

Where does Case come from?

Case-assignment

We have seen that verbs have selectional requirements

- We have been saying that they assign theta roles
- Let's also assume that verbs have to do with assigning Case
- But even verbs that don't assign theta roles can have case-marked subjects

(8) She seems to see him.

- In (8), *she* is NOM but *seems* only assigns a theta role to its complement
- *to see* happily assigns ACC to the object

Where does accusative come from?

Compare the following examples:

(9) a. Mary loves him.

b. *Mary's love him.

c. Mary's love of him.

d. *Mary loves of him.

? Can we link Case-assignment to the object to a category?

Where does accusative come from?

Compare the following examples:

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? Can we link Case-assignment to the object to a category?

- It looks like ACC can come from a verb, but not from a noun (directly)

Where does accusative come from?

Having a verb (or P) is not quite enough, however:

(10) a. Mary very often believes him.

b. Mary believes him very often.

c. *Mary believes very often him.

d. Mary runs very often / very often runs.

(11) a. Mary still believes in him.

b. Mary believes in him still.

c. ?Mary believes still in him.

d. *Mary believes in still him.

Where does accusative come from?

Having a verb (or P) is not quite enough, however:

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d. Mary runs very often / very often runs.

(11) a. Mary still believes in him.

b. Mary believes in him still.

c. ?Mary believes still in him.

d. *Mary believes in still him.

- Adjacency plays a role in Case assignment (in English)!

Invisible morphological case?

Interestingly, *John* behaves just like a pronominal object

(12) a. Mary loves John.

b. *Mary's love John.

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- We can assume that a Case assigner has the same relation to *John* as to *him*

Interim summary on ACC

A verb can establish a **syntactic dependency** with an object

- Morphological effects of this with pronouns, not with proper names
  - abstract Case and morphological case
- Syntactic restrictions: adjacency plays a role
- Other languages differ here: in Hungarian, every direct object is ACC

▸ We can say that the verb assigns ACC to the object

▸ More generally, a syntactic head assigns Case to an NP/DP

? Can we say the same about NOM?

Where does nominative come from?

Let's see whether adjacency plays a role:

(14) a. They bother me.

b. They obviously never bother me.

We have also seen that nouns do not assign NOM to a possessor

(15) a. Mary's love of John.

b. *Mary love of John.

And we have seen other contrasts:

(16) a. I believe her to be happy.

b. I believe that she is happy.

? Can you see a pattern emerging from this data?

Subjects and finiteness

It looks like finiteness plays a role for the Case of the subject

- We can test this with other non-finite forms

(17) a. I saw [her leave the building].

b. *I saw [she leave the building].

(18) a. I saw [her leaving the building].

b. *I saw [she leaving the building].

(19) a. I saw [her killed by a tiger].

b. *I saw [she killed by a tiger].

Subjects and finiteness II

We can have NOM subjects with non-finite main verbs, however...

(20) a. She can accept the decision.

b. He must understand this choice.

c. She does not see the tiger approaching.

? What are the properties of *can*, *must* and *does*?

Subjects and finiteness II

We can have NOM subjects with non-finite main verbs, however...

(20) a. She can accept the decision.

b. He must understand this choice.

c. She does not see the tiger approaching.

? What are the properties of *can*, *must* and *does*?

These items are in **complementary distribution** with each other:

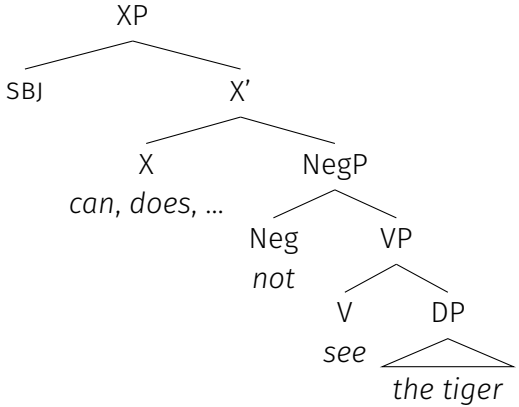
(21) a. *She does can not accept the decision.

b. *She can does not accept the decision.

A head responsible for finiteness?

The examples we have seen so far suggest the following structure:

(22)



? In this kind of structure, what Case does SBJ get?

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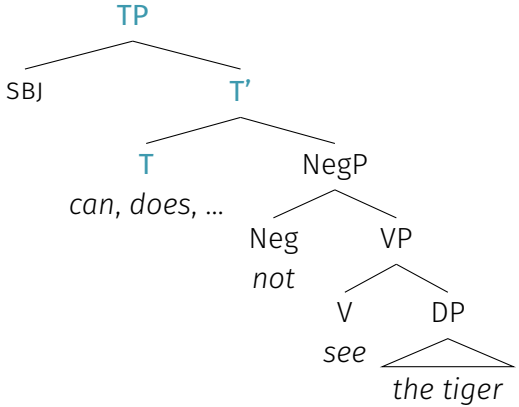


? In this kind of structure, what Case does SBJ get?

Finite and non-finite T

can, *does*, ... in T are also in complementary distribution with *to*

(23) a. Mary must (*to) leave the house.

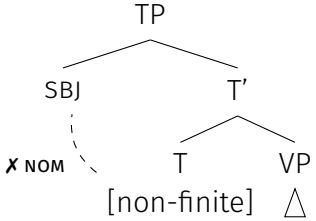
b. Jiři can (*to) run from the tiger.

c. [To leave the house] is exhausting.

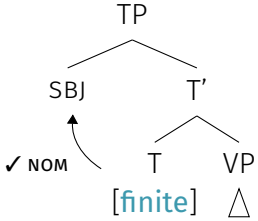
d. [To run from the tiger] would be a good idea.

This suggests that T can be finite or non-finite:

(24)



(25)

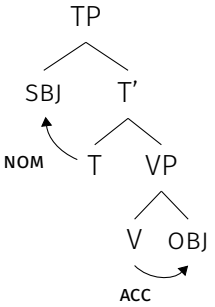


Interim summary

We can analyse Case as being assigned by heads: T and V (and P, too)

- finite T assigns NOM
- finite and non-finite V assigns ACC
- arguments need Case: if a DP lacks Case, a sentence is ungrammatical
- this is the Case Filter

(26)



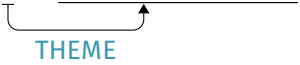
Other aspects of case

The Case Filter and raising

Remember raising?

- In raising, the main clause subject is not assigned a theta role by *seem*

(27) John$_i$ seems [_ to win the race].



In addition, the embedded subject is not assigned Case!

- It has to raise to the main clause to get it!

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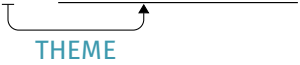

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(27) John$_i$ seems [$_____$$_i$ to win the race].

THEME

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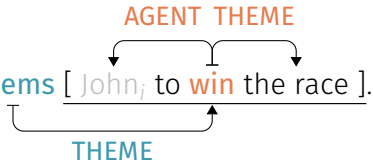

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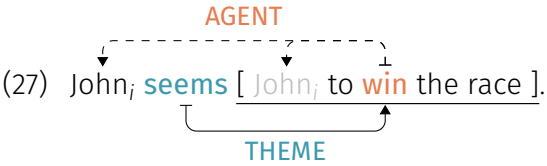

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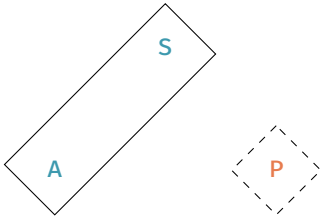
Types of morphological case systems: NOM-ACC

We looked at a nominative-accusative language so far...

- Case-marking can have different alignment
- In NOM-ACC languages, intransitive (S) and transitive (A) subjects are NOM
- When there is an object (P), the object is ACC

(28)



(29) a. [$_S$ I] see.

b. [$_A$ I] see [$_P$ her].

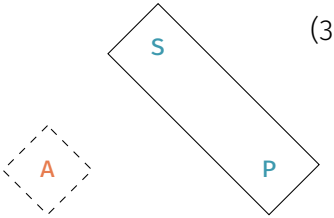
c. [$_A$ She] sees [$_P$ me].

Types of morphological case systems: ERG-ABS

But there are other types of languages: e.g. ergative-absolutive languages

- In ERG-ABS languages, intransitive **subjects** (S) and **objects** (P) **are ABS**
- The **transitive subject** (A) **is ERG**

(30)



(31) Dyirbal (Pama-Nyungan, Australia)

a. [$_S$ *ŋuma*] *banaga-n^{y}u*
father.ABS return-TNS
'Father returned.'

b. [$_S$ *yabu*] *banaga-n^{y}u*
mother.ABS return-TNS
'Mother returned.'

c. [$_P$ *ŋuma*] [$_A$ *yabu-ŋgu*] *buṛa-TNS*
father.ABS mother-ERG see-TNS
'Mother saw father.' (Dixon 1979: 61)

Conclusions

- Some languages have morphological case, some do not
- But it is often assumed that all languages have abstract Case
- Abstract Case, like theta roles, governs the distribution of arguments
- The Case Filter rules out structures with caseless arguments
- There is a lot of (really cool!) cross-linguistic variation!

Tomorrow we will look at agreement: how and when do arguments agree with the verb?

Abbreviations: 3 = third person, A = agent-like argument of a canonical transitive verb, ABS = absolutive, ACC = accusative, ERG = ergative, NOM = nominative, OBJ = object, P = patient-like argument of a canonical transitive verb, S = single argument of a canonical intransitive verb, SBJ = subject, SG = singular, TNS = tense.

References I

Dixon, Robert M. W. 1979. Ergativity. *Language* 55(1). 59–138.
Koeneman, Olaf & Hedde **Zeijlstra**. 2017. *Introducing syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.