

CASE AND STRENGTH

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In the functional-typological literature two main functions of case-marking are distinguished. One motivation for case-marking is *disambiguation*, i.e. the need to distinguish between the arguments of a two- or three-place relation. Another widely attested function of case involves the *expression* or *identification* of specific semantic information. In this paper I will investigate the two functions of case-marking to see where they converge and diverge with respect to the semantic features of arguments that are case-marked. I will focus on the ‘strength’ of the arguments in relation to their case-marking.

1. Introduction

The ‘strength’ of arguments can be viewed as a function of their ‘discourse prominence’ or of their degree of ‘typicality’ as a full-fledged argument. Under both perspectives, it can be argued that semantic features such as animacy and definiteness contribute to the strength of grammatical arguments. The aim of this paper is to explore the relation between the strength of nominal arguments and the ‘meaning’ of case.

2. A functional perspective on case marking

I assume that in ergative-absolutive systems ergative case is assigned to the first argument x of a two-place relation $R(x,y)$, while in nominative-accusative systems accusative case is assigned to the second argument y of a two-place relation $R(x,y)$. Morphologically unmarked (abstract) case is analysed as the absence of case. Nominative case in nominative-accusative systems, and absolutive case in ergative-absolutive patterns, is often unmarked. In many languages, ergative and accusative case are assigned only (or mainly) in transitive sentences, leaving the subject of an intransitive sentence without case. This can be functionally explained (Comrie 1989, Aissen 2003). In order to differentiate the subject from the object it is not necessary to mark them both; a case marker on one of them already serves to distinguish the two arguments. So, when x and y are the two arguments of a transitive clause, and z is the one argument of an intransitive clause, then the picture that emerges under this function of case-marking is as follows. In ergative-absolutive languages x gets ergative case, while y stays unmarked (called

‘absolute’ case, which is often the absence of case). In nominative-accusative case systems, y is marked, while x stays unmarked (called ‘nominative’ case). The only argument z of intransitive clauses stays unmarked in both case systems (thus, it patterns with the transitive object in ergative-absolutive languages and with the transitive subject in nominative-accusative languages). This function of case-marking is generally referred to as the *distinguishing* or *discriminating* function.

The distinguishing function of case is not its only function, however (Song 2001). Morphological cases are generally considered to express some kind of specific (e.g., thematic) information of the noun phrase that bears the case morphology. For instance, dependent on its case, a noun phrase can refer to the goal, the agent, or the experiencer of an event, or it is interpreted with respect to a certain location or direction in space. This function of case marking is usually referred to as the *identifying* or *indexing* function of case. Both functions of case-marking seem to manifest themselves within the different (more syntactic and more semantic) domains of case-marking.

3. Case and argument strength

De Hoop and Narasimhan (2005) point out that, dependent on which function of case-marking is dominant in a certain language, different arguments may get case-marked, the ‘strong’ or the ‘weak’ ones. Cross-linguistically, the strength of the arguments seems to influence case-marking. In de Hoop (1996) I suggested that in languages with differential case-marking, subjects and objects that are ‘strong’ are likely to be overtly case-marked. However, this does not always hold. In fact, sometimes the ‘weak’ rather than the strong arguments receive overt case-marking (cf. Aissen 1999, De Swart 2003, De Hoop and Narasimhan 2005).

The question is how we measure the ‘strength’ of arguments, since languages may vary in this respect. One notion that seems relevant in this respect is ‘discourse prominence’. Legendre *et al.* (1993) use Optimality Theoretic constraints such as “High-prominence arguments receive C_1 ” and “Low-prominence arguments are not case-marked C_1 and C_2 ”, where C_1 in their framework refers to both nominative and ergative, and C_2 to both accusative and absolutive. According to Legendre *et al.*, the one argument of an intransitive clause is always high-prominent, and the two arguments of a transitive clause too. They write high-prominent arguments with capital letters. Thus, the subject and object of a transitive clause can be written as X and Y , and they are universally marked X_1Y_2 (where the subscript indicates the type of case). Legendre *et al.* (1993) argue that passivization applies when the input transitive clause has a low-prominent subject (xY), while antipassives are the result of an input with a low-prominent object (Xy). However, they do not account for the fact that passives are found more often in nominative-accusative languages, while antipassives are found more often in ergative languages (Malchukov, to appear).

Moreover, if we compare two transitive clauses, e.g., *Jane hit Jacky* on the one hand, and *Jane was drinking wine* on the other, then intuitively *wine* is less prominent in the discourse than *Jacky*. Hence, we should use the input Xy for the sentence *Jane was drinking wine* although syntactically this is not an antipassive

construction in English. So, another way of measuring the ‘strength’ of an argument is by looking at its typicality as a full-fledged argument (of a transitive clause) (Hopper and Thompson 1980). Animate and specific arguments are more often realized as ‘real’ arguments than inanimate and non-specific arguments. Note that in fact the different ways of measuring the ‘strength’ of arguments point in the same direction: arguments which are high-prominent in the discourse are usually animate and specific, whereas arguments that are ‘typical’ arguments are usually animate and specific as well.

4. Markedness

One of the fundamental insights of functional typology is that the most typical instances of a certain category are the least likely to be marked (cf. Silverstein 1976). For example, following Comrie (1989), Aissen (2003) notes that an object without case morphology is used for a typical (i.e., semantically unmarked) object in languages that show Differential Object Marking (DOM). A semantically unmarked object is a ‘weak’ object, for example a non-specific object. If, on the other hand, the object is specific, the meaning is considered *marked* (for an object), hence the object will be case-marked. Hindi provides an example of this type of case-alternation.

- | | | | | |
|-----|---------------------|-----|----------|-------|
| (1) | us=ne | ek | bakraa | becaa |
| | he=ERG | one | goat | sold |
| | “He sold a goat.” | | | |
| (2) | us=ne | ek | bakre=ko | becaa |
| | he=ERG | one | goat=ACC | sold |
| | “He sold the goat.” | | | |

Næss (2004), however, points out that, from a language typological point of view, one could also claim that the object in (2) is typical rather than the one in (1). Her argument is that in languages that *have* transitive constructions at all, sentences like (2) are always transitive, whereas languages differ in whether they express sentences like (1) as transitive constructions. Take for example the alternation between (3) and (4) from Greenlandic Eskimo (Bittner 1988):

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| (3) | Jaaku | arna-mik | tuqut-si-v-uq |
| | Jacob | woman-INSTR | kill-AP-IND-3sNOM |
| | “Jacob killed a woman.” | | |
| (4) | Jaaku-p | arnaq | tuqut-p-as |
| | Jacob-ERG | woman | kill-IND-3sERG/3sNOM |
| | “Jacob killed the woman.” | | |

Note that in (3) the ‘direct object’ or the *y* argument is weak/non-specific, whereas it is strong/specific in (4). Yet, only (4) is a true transitive construction with ergative case on the subject and both subject and object agreement on the verb, whereas (3) is in fact an intransitive, more specifically an antipassive construction

and its only 'true' argument (the subject) is therefore unmarked for case, whereas the 'object' is marked with oblique (instrumental) case. The question is how one can maintain that a typical direct object in a transitive clause (i.e., its meaning) is non-specific, if this type of object is very often *not a grammatical object at all* from a morpho-syntactic perspective point of view (i.e., its form).

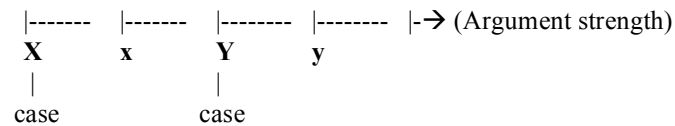
The standard views on this issue largely diverge. Whereas Comrie (1989), Aissen (2003), and De Swart (2003) claim that (1) is an example of an unmarked transitive, Hopper & Thompson (1980), Legendre *et al.* (1993), and Næss (2004) take the opposite view, and claim that sentences like (2) where both arguments are high-prominent in the discourse are truly transitive.

‘Transitive’ verb phrases consisting of a verb and a noun phrase can thus be composed in different ways. For instance, the verb can be straightforwardly transitive ($\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$) in the sense that it denotes a relation between two equal arguments, or the verb is formally intransitive (or detransitivized by an antipassive marker) and its object functions more or less as a predicate modifier (type $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$) (cf. de Hoop 1996). Languages can differ in what counts as ‘more marked’.

5. So, what does case mark?

Case-marking in order to *identify* arguments can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 1: The identifying function of case (de Hoop and Narasimhan 2005)



Clearly, in its identification function, case-marking identifies *strong* arguments as these function as the typical arguments of a transitive verb (the ‘true’ subjects and the ‘true’ objects). So, under the identifying function case is expected to mark the strong subjects and objects in a transitive clause. Note that the identification function is not limited to the core arguments of transitive sentences. Aristar (1997) points out that the strength of noun phrases (in particular, animacy and definiteness) influences other types of case-marking as well. For example, in Yidiny inanimate nouns are marked by locative case, whereas animate nouns that get a similar locative meaning, are marked by dative case (Dixon 1977):

- (5) dajbu-: wunaŋ djaŋga
 ground-LOC exist hole
 “There are holes in the ground.”
- (6) buŋa:-nda wunaŋ djaŋga
 woman-DAT exist hole
 “There are holes in women.”

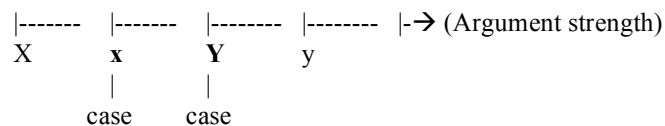
Aristar argues that it is not animacy *per se* that plays a role, but rather discourse prominence in general. The following dialogue shows that when a locative inanimate noun phrase is high-prominent it is marked by dative case (Dixon 1977).

- (7) ṇayu djana:-n naru walba:-
 I stood top stone-LOC
 “I stood on top of a stone.”
- (8) nundu djana:-n naru walba:-nda
 you stood top stone-DAT
 “Oh, you stood on top of the stone!”/ “It was a stone you stood on top of.”

Clearly, the identifying function of case can be argued to mark strong noun phrases, independent of their semantic role or syntactic function.

As was pointed out above, differential case-marking can also be employed to distinguish between subjects and objects. Since subjects are usually stronger than objects, obviously, differential case-marking on the basis of distinguishability marks weak subjects rather than strong ones because the weak ones are 'closer' to the objects in strength. On the other hand, strong objects get case-marked and not the weak ones, because in the case of objects, the strong ones are 'closer' to the subjects. This is illustrated as follows:

Figure 2: The distinguishing function of case (de Hoop and Narasimhan 2005)



Comparing figures 1 and 2, an essential difference between the two functions of case-marking is revealed. While the identifying function explains case-marking of the strong subject and the strong object (the *X* and the *Y*), the distinguishing function explains case-marking of the weak subject and the strong object (the *x* and the *Y*).

5. Conclusion

When case-marking is merely used to distinguish two arguments in a transitive clause, it is sufficient to mark only one of the two arguments. By contrast, when case-marking is used to identify the strength or prominence of an argument, it may apply to each argument independently, both the subject and the object of a transitive clause, as well to other noun phrases. Here, the two functions of case-marking diverge. Moreover, while the identifying function explains case-marking of the strong subject and the strong object, the distinguishing function explains case-marking of the weak subject and the strong object.

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