

FEATURES OF CASE

Barry Blake

Cases are normally described as having one or more functions or meanings. The dative, for instance, might be described as expressing indirect object, purpose and beneficiary. Opposed to this is another approach where all cases have a single generalised meaning (*Gesamtbedeutung*). The idea has its roots in antiquity and becomes prominent in the thirteenth century, both among the Modistae and among the Byzantine grammarians. It rises to the fore again during the structuralist period of the twentieth century with Hjelmslev and Jakobson producing major works on case in the mid-thirties where the meaning of a case is determined largely on the basis of oppositions within the system of cases and with minimal reference to its extension (Hjelmslev 1935, 1937, Jakobson 1936).

The notion that cases have a single, abstract meaning still has supporters such as Rubio (1966) and de Carvalho (1980). However, a description of meaning purely in terms of *Gesamtbedeutungen* has limitations. As Wierzbicka points out, the meanings Jakobson ascribes to the Russian cases are too broad to be predictive and one cannot learn to use the Russian cases from his formulas (1980:xv). The extension of a case is not always derivable from the generalised meaning. However, it does not follow from this observation that one should abandon generalised meanings or at least generalised characterisations. One thing generalised meanings, or at least generalised characterisations, are useful for is to serve as the basis for grouping cases into a hierarchy of sets, each set bearing one or more features in common. Consider case syncretism, for instance. A syncretism between two or more cases is likely to be significant, especially if it recurs in a number of paradigms. In the Indo-European case languages there is syncretism of nominative and accusative (and usually vocative) for neuters, no matter which declension or number they belong to. In Russian there is syncretism of accusative and genitive. This covers animate nominals of the first declension masculine singular or any animate plural or any personal pronoun. Significantly the syncretism covers all the different forms that occur in these paradigms, which would rule out phonological motivation: *sloná* (ACC/GEN) ‘elephant’ *slonóv* (ACC/GEN.PL) ‘elephants’, etc. Such syncretisms can be captured in terms of features. The focus in such an analysis is more on shared formal properties than on meanings, but the idea of a generalised characterisation that abstracts away from details of extension remains the same.

As in phonology where the use of features rather than atomic phonemes becomes more attractive in proportion to the number of generalisations that can be captured, so in case, the feature analysis becomes more convincing as cases are seen to exhibit shared behaviour across a range of areas. Here are some kinds of behaviour that cases share:

(a) **syncretism**

Syncretism in particular paradigms is the most readily observable and the most widespread example of shared properties between cases.

(b) **compound case marking**

In many languages semantic features shared between cases are reflected in the use of separate markers for the features yielding what Mel’ (1986) calls ‘compound cases’.

Consider the case system of Kalkatungu in the Table 1, which contains an unmarked nominative, plus four simple cases and four compound cases (only one marker for each ergative, dative and locative I is shown). The distribution of the marker *-thi* suggests that the locative and ablative have something in common and a comparison of *-thi* and *-thingu* identifies *-ngu* with the notion ‘from’. The aversive is used to

express what is to be avoided ('Keep away from the fire!') or the indirect cause ('sick from (eating) bad meat') The marker *-thungu* is based on the ergative, which expresses agents and instruments, combined with *-ngu* expressing 'from'. Both components of the marking are clearly motivated. Similarly one can identify *-nha* as 'to' and see motivation for its distribution (Blake 1979).

TABLE 1. **Kalkatungu cases**

| | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| nominative | \emptyset | | |
| ergative | <i>-thu</i> | aversive | <i>-thungu</i> |
| dative | <i>-ku</i> | allative I | <i>-kunha</i> |
| locative I | <i>-thi</i> | ablative | <i>-thingu</i> |
| locative II 'facing' | <i>-ngii</i> | allative II 'towards' | <i>-ngiinha</i> |

Naturally there can be shared features that are not revealed via compound marking, but the distribution of recurring markers would seem to be significant and worth pointing out.

(c) **type of stem**

In some languages cases can be distinguished according to the type of stem they attach to. In Tamil, for instance, the oblique cases of some singular nouns are suffixed to an oblique stem. The word for 'tree' has a nominative *maram*, but the other cases are suffixed to a stem *maratt-*. The accusative is *marattai*, the dative *maratt-ukku*, and so on. This distinction in the stem serves to set the nominative off from the other cases.

In some languages relator nouns with meanings like 'top', 'behind' and 'bottom' can appear only in the local cases.

(d) **complement v. adjunct**

Cases may group according to whether they express complements or not. In some languages there is a clear distinction between complement-marking cases and cases that mark adjuncts exclusively. In Pitta-Pitta, for instance, only nominative, ergative, accusative and dative mark complements.

(e) **Adverbial v. adnominal**

Core cases such as nominative and accusative are not normally able to be used adnominally. In Latin the peripheral cases (genitive, dative and ablative) can be used adnominally, but the nominative, vocative and accusative cannot.

In some languages one case may be substituted for another. Such a substitution is a sign of a relatively close relationship and an indication of a markedness relationship between the two. In Latin, the nominative may be substituted for the vocative as in the following example from Livy (where the expected vocative would be *popule Albane*):

- (1) Audi, tu, populus Albanus
 hear.IMP thou people.NOM Alban.NOM
 'Hear, you people of Alba.'

This confirms what we know from syncretism, namely that the vocative and nominative are treated similarly. The fact that the nominative may be substituted for the vocative suggests the nominative is the unmarked member of the pair.

There can also be evidence for markedness with respect to particular functions. Ramarao 1976, for instance, notes that in Telugu a verb cannot take a dative or instrumental unless it has an accusative. He argues that the accusative is unmarked with respect to the dative and the instrumental as a means of encoding complements.

Across languages the distribution of syncretism, stem-forming suffixes, case marking formatives and a consideration of the syntactic distribution of cases reveals that the nominative/oblique, core/peripheral and non local/local groupings are widespread. The nominative-oblique distinction is most often revealed in morphological markedness. In a majority of languages, including the Iralic and Altaic languages, the nominative is unmarked and the other cases bear positive marking. The core-peripheral distinction reveals itself in a number of ways. In some languages there are pervasive syncretisms that cover the nominative and accusative like the nominative-accusative syncretism with Indo-European neuters referred to above. In others there is inflection for the core functions and adpositions for the peripheral functions. This is true of Classical Chinese, for instance (Norman 1988:89f). In other languages again there is a separate stem for the peripheral cases. In Northeast Caucasian languages it is common to find an unmarked nominative, an ergative built on the nominative stem, and the peripheral cases built on the ergative stem. An example from Archi is given in Blake (this volume). The local-nonlocal distinction most often manifests itself in terms of choice of stem. In some languages there are nouns that can appear only in one or more local cases, and in other languages there are stem-forming elements that appear only before the local cases. These stems and stem-forming elements have meanings such as ‘top’, ‘bottom’, ‘back’ and ‘front’. One would assume the stem-forming elements derive from free forms with the local meanings. There is an example of local stem-forming elements in Archi in Blake (this volume).

In Table 2 these widespread distinctions are applied to Latin with oblique, peripheral and local being taken as positive. The vocative is set off from all the other cases by the feature [+addressee] and the genitive is distinguished from the other peripheral cases by the feature [+possessor].

TABLE 2. Feature analysis of Latin case system

| | voc | nom | acc | gen | dat | abl |
|------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| addressee | + | - | - | - | - | - |
| oblique | - | - | + | + | + | + |
| peripheral | - | - | - | + | + | + |
| local | - | - | + | - | - | + |
| possessor | - | - | - | + | - | - |

It is interesting to note that this system of features, which is largely derived from data in a large number of languages, facilitates not only the capturing of pervasive syncretisms, but captures other generalisations as well.

The feature specification [addressee] captures the set of adverbial cases, i.e. all the cases that can mark dependents of the verb.

The feature [oblique] captures nominative-vocative syncretism and {+ oblique} captures the set of cases that can be adjuncts to verbs and which can be modifiers of participles and adjectives. In Latin a genitive, dative or ablative phrase can be adnominal (see (2) below) but with adjectives and participles there is an extra possibility. There are phrases such as *nūdae lacertōs* (nude.NOM.PL arm.ACC.PL) ‘bare as to the arms’ where an accusative phrase is dependent on an adjective. The feature [+ oblique] is also relevant to the gerund or verbal noun. The gerund can only be [+ oblique].¹

The feature specification [peripheral] captures the syncretism of nominative, vocative and accusative found in all neuters and in the plural of the third, fourth and fifth declensions. The specification [+ peripheral] captures the cases that can be adnominal:

- (2) a. **genitive**
vir magnē in geni
 man great.GEN talent.GEN
 ‘a man of great talent’
- b. **dative**
locus rēgnō
 place kingdom.DAT
 ‘a place for a kingdom’
- c. **ablative**
vir summā prudentiā
 man highest.ABL prudence.ABL
 ‘a man of the greatest prudence’

The syncretism of the dative and ablative is captured with two features [+ peripheral] [- possessor]. This syncretism is found in all plurals and in the singular of the second declension and third declension i-stems.

The genitive-dative syncretism can be captured with the specification [+ oblique] [- local]. It occurs only in the singular of the first and fifth declensions and is therefore somewhat marginal, i.e. closer to being an accidental rather than systematic syncretism. Nevertheless genitive-dative syncretism is not uncommon across languages and since the proposed system is based on widely distributed properties of language it can capture this syncretism fairly economically.

In the third declension singular i-stems there is nominative-genitive syncretism. This is isolated and therefore regarded as accidental. The feature system is not designed to capture this syncretism which is not common across languages.

The feature [+ local] covers accusative (which expresses ‘to’ and ‘through’) and the ablative (which expresses ‘in/at’ and ‘from’). There are the two cases that can be governed by prepositions, and which can complete the valency of a verb like *ponere* ‘to put down’. They

¹ Examples include:

| | | |
|------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| acc. | <i>ad bene vīvendum</i> | ‘for living well’ |
| gen. | <i>arsscrībendī</i> | ‘the art of writing’ |
| dat. | <i>pār disserendō</i> | ‘equal to arguing’ |
| abi. | <i>dē bene vīvendō</i> | ‘about living well’ |

are also the only cases in which the supine can appear. The supine is a nominal form derived from a verb. In the following sentences *admonitum* and *dictū* are supines.

- (3) a. Vēnimus tē admonitum
come.PERF.1PL you.ACC remind.ACC
'We have come to remind you.'
- b. Facilis dictū
easy say.ABL
'easy to say'

This work forms part of a cross-language study of case (Blake: to appear). It remains to be seen how well this approach works when applied to a wide variety of languages, but since it is derived from a large scale survey of individual traits in the first place, expectations are that it will work fairly well.

REFERENCES

- Blake, B.J. 1979. *A Kalkatungu grammar*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Blake, B.J. (to appear). Case. Cambridge: University Press.
- Carvaiho, P. de. 1980. Réflexions sur les cas: vers une théorie des cas latins. *L'information grammaticale* 7:3-11.
- Hjelmslev, L. 1935. *La catégorie des cas: Étude de grammaire générale* I. København: Munksgaard [Jutlandica: Aarsskrift for Aarhus Universitet 7.1].
- Hjelmslev, L. 1937. *La catégorie des cas: Étude de grammaire générale* II. København: Munksgaard [Jutlandica: Aarsskrift for Aarhus Universitet 9.3].
- Jakobson, R. 1936/1971. Beitrag zur allgemeinen Kasuslehre: Gesamtbedeutungen der russischen Kasus. In R. Jakobson. *Selected writings II. words and language*, 23-71. The Hague: Mouton.
- Mel'čuk, I.A.. 1986. Towards a definition of case. In R.D. Brecht & J.S. Levine (eds) *Case in Slavic*. Columbus OH: Slavica Publishers, 35-85.
- Norman, J. 1988. *Chinese*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Ramarao, C. 1976. Markedness in case. In S. Agesthalingom & K. Kushalappa Gowda (eds) *Dravidian case system*. Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 221-40.
- Rubio, L. 1966. *Introducción a la Sintaxis Estructural del Latin, vol. 1. Casos y Preposiciones*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Wierzbicka, A. 1980. *The case for surface case*. Ann Arbor: Karoma.