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Introduction

So she began: ‘O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool? I am very tired of swimming about here, O Mouse!’ (Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen in her brother’s Latin Grammar, ‘A mouse – of a mouse – to a mouse – a mouse – O mouse!’)

[Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, p. 28]

1.1 Overview

This book is meant to serve as an introduction to various notions of case within modern theoretical linguistics. In order to tackle such an undertaking, several issues must be dealt with. One is the issue of what “case” really means. Another is the question as to which historically motivated assumptions have served to form our current notion of case. This book is written primarily from a syntactic point of view and therefore surveys a treatment of case as proposed within various theories of syntax, unavoidably, however, it also touches on semantic and morphological issues along the way.

Modern syntactic theories did not appear out of thin air (though that may appear to be the case to some, given the tremendous impact of the Chomskyan revolution in the 50s and 60s within theoretical linguistics). Rather, modern linguistic thought as practised in the Western world is informed directly by unbroken grammatical traditions which date back to the ancient Greek and Roman world. This is particularly true for case, as we are still using the nomenclature and the basic distinctions proposed by the Romans over 2000 years ago.

This book therefore includes a discussion of the treatment of case in the ancient Greek and Roman tradition, but then by way of comparison also includes a discussion of other theories that were on the market. A contemporary of the

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Greek and Roman tradition was the Indian linguistic tradition, which dates back to at least Pāṇini's grammar of Sanskrit (about 600 BCE) and which remains current in much of Indian linguistic thought today.

Another tradition which developed a few centuries down the line and which had some interesting ideas with respect to the treatment of case is the Arabic tradition, which grew out of the formation of the Muslim Empire (about 700 CE). The book therefore includes a brief discussion of these foundational perspectives before moving on to a discussion of modern linguistic thinking.

One problem for any book on 'case' in modern syntactic theory is that a straightforward comparison across theories is doomed to fail. This is because the notion 'case' means different things to different people. Indeed, a survey of all the phenomena which have been described as 'case' leads one to the conclusion that one does not know what case really is. As such, this book focuses on a number of guiding themes which have been consistently associated with an analysis of case phenomena. Among these, the most central are the use of semantic or thematic roles and the role of grammatical relations in various theories of syntax. The book abstracts away from detailed considerations of the morphophonology; however, for each syntactic theory that is examined, I do ask the question: how well does it deal with the overt realization of case?¹

Among the syntactic theories considered in this book are Relational Grammar (RG), Government and Binding (GB), the Minimalist Program (MP) or Minimalism, Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG), and Role and Reference Grammar (RRG). This does not exhaust the number of different theories of syntax, but these are the theories which maintain an active research interest in case per se. A separate chapter is devoted to various types of *linking theories*, which seek to establish generalizations between overt case marking, argument structure and grammatical relations. I also discuss case within Optimality Theory (OT). Work in Optimality Theoretic Syntax has only really developed since Grimshaw's (1997) landmark article and as such OT represents a field of enquiry that is constantly shifting. The chapter on OT therefore runs the risk of being outdated almost as soon as the book is published; however, I have tried to concentrate on those approaches to case which will surely be thought of as "classic" or landmark papers in the time to come.

The book is organized as follows. The remainder of this chapter takes the reader through some phenomena that have been associated with the notion of case. This includes phenomena which everybody would agree that are indeed case, others which upon closer inspection must be rejected as being described as case and several others which certainly appear to be instances of case mark-

¹ A good bulk of the literature on case is devoted to a discussion of the morphophonological properties of case (see Blake 2001 for some references and discussion). This book does not do justice to this literature, but instead seeks to concentrate on the morphosyntactic and semantic issues that are connected with case phenomena.

ing, but which modern theories of syntax do not quite know how to deal with. Some of these phenomena will be encountered again in subsequent chapters. Others will never appear again. This book does not intend to provide an exhaustive discussion of the types of case phenomena—Barry Blake’s book *Case* does a very good job of that already. This book instead concentrates on a few core phenomena which all theories must provide an account for, so as to keep some constant point of comparison across theories. Individual case marking phenomena are introduced along the way as needed for the illustration of particular theoretical considerations in the first part of the book, which deals with the ideas for case proposed in various syntactic theories. Once the foundational ideas of the various syntactic theories have been introduced, individual case marking phenomena which have received much attention in the syntactic literature are considered. This includes a discussion of quirky case and ergativity, but also of the semantics of case.

At the end of each chapter, I include a few exercises. These give the reader a chance to actively engage with the material that was introduced.

1.2 What is Case?

This section seeks to drive home the point that we do not have a well-defined understanding of the notion of case. There are some core notions which most linguists would agree on, but not every linguist will extend the label ‘case’ to the same range of phenomena. Going beyond just the linguistic community, most people who have gone to school and learned a foreign language will have encountered the notion of case in terms of a paradigm which they had to memorize. The classic example is Latin. The table in (1) shows the paradigm for Latin feminine nouns ending in *-a*.

(1)

<i>porta</i> ‘door’		
Case Name	Singular	Plural
Nominative	porta	portae
Genitive	portae	portarum
Dative	portae	portis
Accusative	portam	portas
Ablative	portā	portis
Vocative	porta	portae

If you know anything about Latin, you will also know that other types of nouns (e.g., masculine nouns ending in *-us*) have a different set of endings than the ones shown above. You will also know that Latin adjectives have to agree in number, gender and case with the noun they modify. This makes for quite a complex system and for quite a bit of memorization that generations

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of schoolchildren have endured in the Western world. Note also that some of the forms in the cells of the table in (1) are the same. This is a sign of an incipient collapse of the case system: the modern descendants of Latin, e.g., French, Spanish or Italian, have not maintained the distinctions Latin made. Some historical processes with respect to case are discussed in section 6.8.

What could such a complicated case system be good for? After all, the modern Romance languages abandoned the Latin system due to a series of sound changes and English also does not make much use of case (see Hudson 1995 for the claim that English has no case whatsoever). One good hypothesis is that explicit case marking is useful for the establishment of the *semantic roles* of nouns (and pronouns) and their *syntactic* relationship to the verb. Blake (2001), for example, begins his book on case with the following definition.

Case is a system of marking dependent nouns for the type of relationship they bear to their heads. [Blake 2001:1]

Compare this with Fillmore's (1968) understanding in his landmark paper *The case for case*.

In the past, research on 'case' has amounted to an examination of the variety of semantic relationships which can hold between nouns and other portions of sentences; ...
 [Fillmore 1968:2]

Take the Latin examples in (2). Here we have a transitive verb 'see', which is the head of the sentence. Because this verb is transitive, it has two dependent noun phrases: 'girl' and 'door'. The noun *puella* 'girl' is marked with nominative case, while the noun *porta* 'door' has accusative case. The case marking allows us to conclude that in both (2a) and (2b) the girl sees the door, and not the other way around (which would be semantically odd).

- (2) a. *puella portam videt*
 girl.F.Nom door.F.Acc see.Pres.3.Sg
 'The girl sees the door.' Latin
- b. *portam puella videt*
 door.F.Acc girl.F.Nom see.Pres.3.Sg
 'The girl sees the door.' Latin

English does not allow the same freedom in word order as Latin. Instead of overt marking on the noun, it makes use of the position of the noun in the sentence in order to indicate the seer vs. the thing being seen.

The generalization which emerges from this perspective is that case is a handy tool for marking semantic relationships between nouns and verbs, or, more generally between dependents and a head. Languages may choose to encode this relationship either structurally in terms of designated positions (e.g., English) or via overt morphological markers. Languages like Icelandic

or Bulgarian, however, are somewhat of a problem for this view. Icelandic employs both strategies simultaneously in that it combines a rather rigid word order with a fairly rich and complex case marking system (Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson 1985). This would appear to be a case of overkill and is something that has not been adequately explained by syntactic theories to date. The opposite is true of Bulgarian, which has about as much case marking as English does (i.e., virtually none), but which allows quite some freedom in word order, unlike English. The word order in Bulgarian is governed by *discourse configurational* factors (see Kiss 1995 for a discussion with respect to Hungarian). Common discourse configurational factors have effects like placing topics first in the sentence, or placing focused constituents immediately preverbally. Again, the interaction of discourse related factors with case marking remains poorly understood, even though there is a clear link (chapter 7).

Indeed, case is an area of morphosyntax which continues to receive quite a bit of attention in syntactic theories because no theory can honestly claim to have “the answer” as to why case works the way it does crosslinguistically. However, the approaches worked out for individual case marking phenomena have furthered our understanding of case and its interaction with other (morpho)syntactic phenomena considerably. Before going on to discuss these syntactic hypotheses in the rest of the book, I use the remainder of this section to introduce some phenomena which continue to be problematic and therefore of interest to syntactic theories of case.

1.2.1 Head vs. Dependent Marking

The core notion of case describes instances like the Latin paradigm in (1), which involves marking a noun via inflectional endings. In *dependent marking* languages such as Latin, the nouns bear some form of special marking which indicates their relationship to the head (the verb in the examples above). However, instances of *head marking* could also be seen as a type of case. In head marking languages the head of the phrase bears information about participants in the clause. An example from Navajo is shown in (3).

- (3) At'éd ashkii yiyiitsá
 girl boy 3Acc.3Nom.saw
 'The girl saw the boy.' (Jelinek 1987:89) Navajo

These two types of marking strategies can be represented schematically as in (4) (taken from Nordlinger 1998:46).

- (4) a. *Dependent-marked*: (as in Latin)
 Noun+Case Noun+Case Noun+Case Verb
 b. *Head-marked*: (as in Navajo)
 Noun₁ Noun₂ Noun₃ Verb+Aff₁+Aff₂+Aff₃

are dependent on a predicational head. This entails that case should be used to mark arguments of a verb, but not adjuncts. In fact, this is how most modern syntactic theories view the use of case as well. However, many languages use case to mark adjuncts. This section provides one example from German, and another from Korean, though examples from Latin or several other languages could also have been included. In both Korean and German, optional non-argument measure phrases appear in the accusative. The German verb *arbeiten* ‘work’ in (7) is generally intransitive (takes only one argument), as shown in (7a). In (7b) there is an additional accusative noun phrase; however, this accusative cannot be analysed as the object of the verb because the day has not been worked at or on. Rather, the accusative phrase is an adverbial of duration.

- (7) a. Ich habe gearbeitet.
 I.Nom have.Pres.1.Sg work.PastP
 ‘I worked.’ German
- b. Ich habe [den ganzen Tag] gearbeitet.
 I.Nom have.Pres.1.Sg the.M.Acc whole.M.Acc day work.PastP
 ‘I worked the whole day.’ German

Another example comes from Korean (e.g., Maling 1989). Here the adverbials can optionally be marked with the accusative case, as in (8), but unlike the German example above, the adverbials need not necessarily be accusative.² Again, as in German, the adverbial can be marked with accusative even when there is no object of the clause, as in (9).

- (8) Suna-nŭn kŭ chaek-ŭl tu pŏn-(ŭl) ilk-ŏss-ta
 Suna-Top the book-Acc two times-(Acc) read-Past-Decl
 ‘Suna read the book twice.’ Korean
- (9) Suna-nŭn onŭl ilkop sikan tongan(-ŭl) cha-ass-ta
 Suna-Top today seven hour for(-Acc) sleep-Past-Decl
 ‘Suna slept for 7 hours today.’ Korean

Given the basic assumption that the primary purpose of case is to mark the arguments of a predicate, this type of data remains an issue which has not as yet received a good/standard solution within modern syntactic theories.

1.2.4 Case and Finiteness

Another common assumption made in syntactic theories, and which has been formally articulated as the *Case Resistance Principle* (Stowell 1981), is that finiteness and case marking are in complementary distribution. While non-finite embedded clauses such as the Urdu infinitive in (10a) can be case marked, the corresponding embedded finite clause in (10b) bears no case marking.

²Thanks go to Shin-Sook Kim for supplying these examples.

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- (10) a. anjum=ne [g^har a-ne]=ko kah-a
 Anjum.F=Erg home.M.Loc come-Inf.Obl=Acc say-Perf.M.Sg
 'Anjum said to come home.' Urdu
- b. anjum=ne dek^h-a [ke vo g^har
 Anjum.F=Erg see-Perf.M.Sg that Pron.3.Sg home.M.Loc
 a-yi]
 come-Perf.F.Sg
 'Anjum saw that she came home.' Urdu

In many of the instances where an embedded predicate may be overtly case marked, it turns out to be a nominalization of some kind. This is true for Urdu as well, where the infinitive can be regarded as some kind of deverbal noun. Thus, because the verb has some nominal properties, it follows naturally that there should be the possibility of marking it with case. The verbs in embedded finite clauses are usually not nominalizations, but finite verbs. As such, they cannot be marked for case. Of course, there are counterexamples to this generalization (e.g., see Nordlinger and Saulwick 2002, ex. (32) for a dative (purpose) marked future), as there are counterexamples to a related generalization involving the case marking of dependents of nonfinite heads, discussed in the next section.

1.2.5 Nominal Case

A further issue to which quite a lot of attention has been devoted, but which will not figure much in this book is the treatment of the case marking on nominals which are licensed by other nominals. The standard case for this situation is the genitive, as in *John's hat*³ or *The destruction of the city*. The genitive has therefore often been referred to as a *nominal case* and a distinction is made between verbal predicates which license *verbal case* such as nominative and accusative, and nominal predicates which license genitive case.

However, in some languages verbal nouns allow arguments with either a nominal case or a verbal case. A famous example comes from Japanese noun-verb complex predicates with *suru* 'do' (Grimshaw and Mester 1988), whereby the arguments of the noun-verb complex can be either marked with the genitive or with verbal cases such as the dative or accusative. The Urdu examples in (11) illustrate the same type of case marking alternation in conjunction with a verbal noun (infinitive).

The expected pattern is as in (11a), where the nominalization of the verb 'crackle' causes its object 'lightning' to appear in the genitive case, i.e., in a

³There is some discussion in the literature as to whether the English 's should be treated as case (e.g., Zwicky 1975), but this is irrelevant for our purposes, as many other languages use the genitive in just this configuration.

languages, which allow *case stacking*.⁴ An example from Kayardild is shown in (13). It illustrates the most extreme documented instance of case stacking.

The suffix glossed as C.OBL (complementizing oblique) indicates that this item is part of the embedded complement clause. The suffix glossed as M.ABL is a modal ablative and marks the clause as having past tense (together with the finite verb). Both of these suffixes can be argued to be case markers (Evans 1995b) as their distribution and morphosyntactic properties do not set them apart from other morphemes which would be considered to be standard case.

- (13) Ngada mungurru, [maku-ntha yalawu-jarra-ntha yakuri-naa-ntha
 I know [woman-C.OBL catch-PST-C.OBL fish-M.ABL-C.OBL
 thabuju-karra-nguni-naa-ntha mijil-nguni-naa-nth].
 brother-GEN-INST-M.ABL-C.OBL net-INST-M.ABL-C.OBL]
 'I know that the woman caught the fish with brother's net.' Kayardild
 (Evans 1995b:406)

As already hinted at by the modal ablative in (13), case markers are also put to work as tense/mood/aspect markers in Australian languages. The examples in (14) come from Kayardild (Evans 1995a:107–108).

- (14) a. ngada warra-ja ngarn-kir
 1.Sg.Nom go-Act beach-All
 'I am going/have gone to the beach.' Kayardild
 b. ngada warra-ju ngarn-kiring-ku
 1.Sg.Nom go-Pot beach-All-MProp
 'I will go to the beach.' Kayardild
 c. ngada warra-jarra ngarn-kiring-kina
 1.Sg.Nom go-Pst beach-All-MAbl
 'I went to the beach.' Kayardild
 d. ngada warra-da ngarn-kiring-inj
 1.Sg.Nom go-Des beach-All-MObl
 'I would like to go to the beach.' Kayardild

The allative, modal proprietive, modal ablative and modal oblique all serve to express tense/aspect/mood distinctions. Note that this phenomenon is not confined to Australian languages, but that languages like Finnish have also been implicated in this type of case usage.

The phenomenon of case stacking is discussed again from the perspective of a formal analysis in chapter 8. The use of case as a marker of tense, aspect, or mood, however, is left aside within the scope of this book as this issue remains to be tackled properly within formal syntax and semantics (but see Nordlinger and Sadler 2004a,b for some recent, clear work on this issue).

⁴Case stacking has also been known as *Suffixaufnahme*, a term which has a long and venerable tradition (Plank 1995a).