

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Does case have meaning?

Typically, within the minimalist framework, we expect the answer to be negative. Case is regarded as an uninterpretable feature whose checking constitutes a necessary condition for the licensing of nominal phrases (noun phrases (NPs) or determiner phrases (DPs)). This is a syntactic phenomenon which has morphological realization (e.g. case suffixes) in some languages but not in others. Relation to meaning is either totally absent (with structural cases like the nominative) or present to a very limited degree, when associated with theta-role assignment (with inherent case checked e.g. by prepositional heads).

Indeed, in many instances, it is easy to see that case-checking depends on the purely syntactic configuration, the structural position in which the DP appears, rather than on semantic considerations. For instance, over the centuries, nominative marking has been associated with both subjecthood (a syntactic function) and the thematic role of an agent (a semantic notion linked to the theta-grid of the verb). This duality is not surprising, given that subjecthood is, in general, associated with agentivity, in the sense that the most prototypical subjects are agents. However, it is not difficult to choose among these two notions as far as case-marking is concerned. While agentive subjects of finite clauses are indeed generally nominative (in nominative-accusative languages), the same case characterizes subjects that bear other thematic roles, such as experiencer (1a), instrument (1b) and theme (1c), or even subjects like dummy *it* in (1d), which carry no semantic meaning and fulfill an exclusively grammatical function.

- (1) a. John loves Mary.
- b. This key opens the door easily.
- c. The ball rolled down the hill.
- d. It is getting dark.

Moreover, an agent does NOT appear in the nominative case in passive sentences, in which it no longer occupies the position of the subject, or in those instances in which it functions as the subject of a non-finite clause:

- (2) a. This house was built \*(by) Jack.  
 b. \*(For) John to jump off the roof would be unwise.

The ungrammaticality of the sentences in (2) without *by* and *for* is due to the fact the proper names cannot check their case feature. Nominative checking is unavailable despite the agentivity.

What we conclude is that the presence (and licensing) of the nominative is dependent on syntactic relations (specifically, the nominal must appear in the specifier position of a finite tense head (T head)) and not on semantics. In many languages, the same conclusion is drawn regarding accusative case of objects (but see Chapters 4 and 5, which address the semantic consequences of accusative marking in a range of languages).

But, at the same time, numerous linguistic phenomena reveal that case is strongly interrelated with semantics and pragmatics, even if we put aside the issue of theta-role assignment. This is particularly evident in case alternations, a phenomenon whereby a DP can be marked by two morphologically distinct cases in what looks like the same construction, and the choice of case has clear consequences for meaning. Several examples are provided below.

In Finnic languages, a direct object may appear in either the accusative or the partitive case, as illustrated by the Finnish minimal pair in (3). The contrast is interrelated with the aspectual properties of the clause and with the interpretation of the nominal.

- (3) FINNISH  
 a. Join veden.  
    drank<sub>1.SG</sub> water<sub>ACC</sub>  
    ‘I drank the water.’  
 b. Join vettä.  
    drank<sub>1.SG</sub> water<sub>PART</sub>  
    ‘I drank some water / I was drinking water.’

Accusative marking of the object *veden* ‘water’ in (3a) results in a telic, or bounded, interpretation of the VP: the subject has finished drinking (up) the contextually relevant amount of water. In turn, (3b), with a partitive object, may receive an unbounded/progressive reading: the subject was engaged in the process of drinking water, but no information is provided as to whether this event has ever reached

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a natural endpoint. Alternatively, the sentence may report a completed event, but in that case, the partitive form is reflected in the semantics of the object: it receives an indefinite, quantificational, pseudo-partitive meaning (*some (amount of) water*, rather than *the water*).<sup>1</sup>

More generally, Finnic languages exhibit an object case alternation which correlates with (or is affected by) verbal aspect and, in certain instances, has consequences for the semantic properties of the nominal (see e.g. Lees 2015 and references therein, and Chapter 4). This correlation does not necessarily mean that the relation between case and semantics is direct; it could potentially be mediated by the syntax. Still, it is an empirical fact that morphological form and meaning are interrelated; further, from the perspective of the hearer, the case of the object allows to determine certain semantic properties of the sentence, such as its aspect.

Yet another object case alternation, quite widespread in world languages, is differential object marking (DOM). Rather than potentially receiving two different cases, within this phenomenon, an object of the verb may either be case-marked or remain unmarked. The contrast, again, is strongly interrelated with meaning. Depending on the individual language, the choice between the two variants is determined by such properties as animacy, the +/-human distinction, definiteness and specificity (see e.g. Aissen 2003, de Swart 2003, and Chapter 5). For the sake of illustration, consider the minimal pair in (4):

## (4) KANNADA

- a. naanu pustaka huDuk-utt-idd-eene  
 I<sub>NOM</sub> book look.for<sub>-NPST</sub>-be<sub>-1.SG</sub>  
 'I am looking for a book.'
- b. naanu pustaka-vannu huDuk-utt-idd-eene  
 I<sub>NOM</sub> book<sub>ACC</sub> look.for<sub>-NPST</sub>-be<sub>-1.SG</sub>  
 'I am looking for a book.'

(Lidz 2006)

The object in (4a) is unmarked for case, whereas its counterpart in (4b) appears in the accusative form. This contrast correlates with a truth-conditional difference. The accusative object in (4b) obligatorily

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the two interpretations are compatible, rendering the third reading of the sentence: the subject was engaged in the process of drinking some undefined amount of water which has not been referred to previously in the discourse. In other words, the quantificational interpretation of the DP is compatible with the unbounded reading of the clause.

receives a specific, wide-scope reading: there is a particular book that the subject is looking for. In turn, the caseless nominal in (4a) can receive both a wide- and a narrow-scope interpretation. The sentence may mean that the speaker is looking either for a specific book or, roughly, for any book.

Further, in some instances, a change in the form of the nominal creates fine semantic distinctions which are very difficult to pinpoint, even though native speakers of the language intuitively feel that some contrast is present. For example, consider the following minimal pair exhibiting the instrumental/nominative opposition on a sentence-initial adjunct:

## (5) RUSSIAN

- a. Soldatom Boris ne imel žalosti.  
 Soldier<sub>INSTR</sub> Boris NEG had compassion  
 ‘When Boris was a soldier he was not compassionate.’
- b. Soldat, Boris ne imel žalosti.  
 Soldier<sub>NOM</sub> Boris NEG had compassion  
 ‘Being a soldier, Boris was not compassionate.’

(Geist 2006, ex. 26)

The difference in meaning, although elusive, seems to be a matter of restricting those situations in which Boris has no compassion (see Geist 2006). According to (5b), he was not compassionate in general, which results from (or at least is interrelated with) the fact that he is a soldier. (5a), however, asserts that Boris is not compassionate in those situations in which he functions as a soldier but suggests that there exist alternative roles that he fulfills and/or alternative times when he does not act as a soldier. The implicature is that in these situations, he may very well be compassionate.

This contrast constitutes part of a more general nominative/instrumental opposition, observed in some Slavic languages, including Russian and Polish, which has been linked in the literature to the distinction between individual-level and stage-level predication. Instrumental case on predicates is associated with stage-level, impermanent properties, which hold in particular situations or during a limited temporal interval, whereas the nominative is more likely to be used with permanent properties (see e.g. Geist 2006, Citko 2008, and Section 7.1 of Chapter 7). In Uralic languages, it is the essive case that correlates with stage-level semantics (see de Groot 2017 and references therein, and Section 7.2 of Chapter 7).

Other case alternations are indeed associated with theta-role distinctions or with features of which thematic roles are composed. But

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even in these instances, the relation is somewhat more complex than originally assumed for inherent/lexical case, which is assigned due to a (potentially) idiosyncratic requirement of a given lexical head. Consider the following illustration of the nominative/ergative alternation in Urdu/Hindi (Butt 2006b, ex. 4):

## (6) URDU/HINDI

- a. **ram**                    k<sup>h</sup>ās-a  
 Ram<sub>M.SG.NOM</sub>    cough<sub>-PERF.M.SG</sub>  
 'Ram coughed.'
- b. **ram=ne**                k<sup>h</sup>ās-a  
 Ram<sub>M.SG=ERG</sub>    cough<sub>-PERF.M.SG</sub>  
 'Ram coughed (**purposefully**).'

While above, differential **object** marking has been briefly discussed, here, we deal with an instance of differential **subject** marking: the subject of a clause may either remain morphologically unmarked (which is taken to be the nominative case form in (6)) or appear with an overt ergative case-marker. Just as with DOM, the case contrast correlates with a difference in meaning. Specifically, the addition of the ergative marker brings in the meaning component of intentionality: the action of coughing was performed by the subject on purpose. This property is, of course, an inherent component of agentivity. An ergative subject gets interpreted as an agent.

A very different phenomenon within which a case alternation is also related to theta-role assignment is found in German. Spatial prepositions in this language take either dative or accusative complements. Crucially, there exist prepositions which allow for both – with clear consequences for the truth conditions of the sentence. Specifically, in such alternations, the accusative variant of the prepositional phrase (PP) is interpreted as a goal and the dative one as a location.

## (7) GERMAN

- a. Alex tanzte in dem Zimmer.  
 Alex danced in the<sub>DAT</sub> room  
 'Alex danced in the room.'
- b. Alex tanzte in das Zimmer.  
 Alex danced in the<sub>ACC</sub> room  
 'Alex danced into the room.'

(Zwarts 2006, ex. 2a–b)

For instance, in (7a) above, the complement of the preposition *in* 'in' appears in the dative case (as reflected in the form of the definite

article). As a result, the whole PP is interpreted as a location: the event of dancing took place in the room. In turn, in (7b), the same DP is marked with the accusative case. Crucially, the sentence contains the same preposition *in*, but this time the form of its complement is different. The PP receives the thematic role of a goal. The dancing event is entailed to proceed along a path which begins outside of the room and ends in the room.

In such instances, a particular case is not merely required by a preposition which assigns to its complement a fixed thematic role. Rather, the state of affairs is more complex: more than one case is available, and different forms are accompanied by different meanings. (For further details and additional languages exhibiting similar contrasts, see Section 3.6 in Chapter 3 and Section 4.3 in Chapter 4.)

Finally, before completing this introductory section, it is worth pointing out that a correlation between case and meaning can be observed in the absence of an alternation as well. Consider, for example, the translative case in Uralic languages. Translative marking systematically characterizes adjectival and nominal predicates in sentences that entail a change of state. This is illustrated in (8) for Finnish:

- (8) FINNISH  
 Toini tuli sairaaksi.  
 Toini became ill<sub>TRA</sub>  
 ‘Toini became ill.’

(Fong 2003)

This sentence entails a change of state due to the presence of the verb *tulla*, which, in this context, is best translated as ‘become’. Toini is entailed to undergo a shift from healthiness to sickness. The new state which he enters at the endpoint of the event is denoted by an adjectival phrase (AP) predicate that contains the translative suffix *-ksi*. In general, the translative is systematically observed in sentences that entail a change of state. It is unacceptable in a sentence like (9), whose meaning is purely stative and non-dynamic and which, consequently, does not denote a change:

- (9) \*Toini oli sairaaksi.  
 Toini was ill<sub>TRA</sub>  
 ‘Toini was ill.’

In other words, even in the absence of a case alternation, a link between case and a certain meaning component can be established. Moreover, the case-marked phrase need not bear any thematic role (as it need not be an argument).

(In fact, the view presented here for the sake of illustration is somewhat simplified. In Finnish, there do exist environments in which the translative is possible with no entailment of an actual change; arguably, however, those examples do involve dynamics and/or a **potential** change. See Chapter 7 for a detailed description of the data and a proposed analysis.)

The phenomena illustrated above raise a series of questions regarding the nature of case. Can it have meaning and make a contribution to the truth conditions of a sentence, or does it always correspond to an uninterpretable feature? If the latter is true, then in what way are the semantic components observed above contributed? If the relation between case and meaning is indirect, mediated by the syntax, then which syntactic elements are responsible for the interface with semantics? On a more descriptive level, which semantic and pragmatic phenomena can, cross-linguistically, be reflected by case-marking?

The goal of this book is to look into some of these questions. A range of semantic case-related phenomena from different languages will be considered. We will discuss both the intricacies of the data and the linguistic approaches to the phenomena that have been proposed in the literature. It is important to emphasize that the question of whether case is primary and meaning secondary, or vice versa (i.e. whether case determines meaning or rather meaning affects case-marking) is to a considerable degree subject to theory-internal considerations. In this book, we will be interested in those phenomena within which morphological marking correlates with semantic or pragmatic properties, empirically speaking. The more specific nature of the case-meaning relation will be addressed in the course of the discussion of linguistic analyses.

## 1.2 WHAT IS CASE?

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In the previous section, we saw examples of various case alternations. But **what is case**, to begin with? It turns out that, despite (or maybe even due to) the important role that it plays in the linguistic theory, case is not easy to define. Intuitively and pre-theoretically speaking, we deal with a morpho-syntactic phenomenon whereby a noun (and often some of its associates) appears with different marking depending on the position it occupies in a sentence and on the role it fulfills. To illustrate, in (10a) below,<sup>2</sup> the nominal phrase *laatikko* ‘a/the box’

<sup>2</sup> [www.kaleva.fi/uutiset/ulkomaat/musta-laatikko-on-oikeasti-oranssi/275483/](http://www.kaleva.fi/uutiset/ulkomaat/musta-laatikko-on-oikeasti-oranssi/275483/), accessed May 27, 2018.

functions as the subject of the sentence and appears in the nominative case, which is a classic case of subjects (unless we are dealing with an ergative language, see Section 1.4.2). In contrast, in (10b) the same nominal denotes a goal toward which the motion of the mouse is directed. As a result, it appears in a different form, in this instance, the illative one (illative is a case of goals). In turn, *hiiri* ‘a/the mouse’ occupies the subject position in this example and therefore receives nominative marking.

## (10) FINNISH

- a. *Musta laatikko on oikeasti oranssi.*  
 But box<sub>NOM</sub> is really orange  
 ‘But, in fact, the box is orange.’
- b. *Hiiri juoksi laatikkoon.*  
 mouse ran box<sub>ILL</sub>  
 ‘A/The mouse ran into the box.’

Formulating a single definition of case is challenging at the very least, given considerable contrasts between different types of cases, as well as the fact that the very term *case* can be used in somewhat different senses. As we will see below, some cases are purely grammatical, whereas others reflect semantic relations; further, in some languages, nominals in different cases are distinguishable morpho-phonologically, whereas in others, we deal with a purely syntactic phenomenon with no, or almost no, morphological realization.

Tentatively, case can be defined as the marking of the nominal that reflects its **relation to other elements in the sentence**. Thus, Blake (2001:1) defines case as “a system of marking dependent nouns for the type of relationship they bear to their heads.” Concentrating on overtly reflected case, Butt (2006a:4) states that “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.” Similarly to Butt, Grimm (2005:8) relates to both syntax and semantics in his definition and proposes to “conceive of case as a morphological means of marking arguments for syntactic, semantic and/or pragmatic content.”

Case may be determined by the purely syntactic function of the nominal (e.g. subject versus direct object versus indirect object), which also means marking the syntactic relation in which the nominal stands to the verb (and other lexical and functional elements in the sentence). But it may be also interrelated with semantics, as discussed in Section 1.1 above and as illustrated in (10b), in which the

### 1.3 *Abstract versus Morpho-Syntactic Case*

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illative form provides information regarding the spatial relation which holds between the box and the mouse and regarding the change this relation undergoes in the course of the event. The range of semantic notions to which case-marking is sensitive turns out to be much wider than prototypical examples may suggest.

While the minimalist approach considers case as a primarily syntactic phenomenon, the cognitive framework places much more emphasis on the semantic and pragmatic side. The following list of assumptions is listed by Janda (1993:15) as an integral part of the cognitive approach to case:

- (i) Case is always meaning-bearing.
- (ii) Case meaning has a constant objective moment that can be subjectively applied.
- (iii) Case meaning involves the organization of rather than the specification of information.
- (iv) Case meaning is not essentially different from lexical meaning in structure.

While the present book concentrates primarily on the generative linguistic framework, reference to cognitive semantic approaches will also be made.

Further, within the minimalist framework, it has been proposed that, in certain instances, a case feature may be (construed as) semantic/interpretable (see e.g. Svenonius 2002, 2006, Richards 2013). Further, de Swart and de Hoop (2018:11) argue that case-markers “may impose typing restrictions on their arguments.” Under this view, case does play a role in **semantic** relations.

In order to understand the nature of case better, it is not sufficient to concentrate on its defining features which are shared by all or almost all of its instances. Rather, it is essential to consider different case systems and the various distinctions and classifications that have been made in the literature on the topic. This is what Sections 1.3–1.5 are dedicated to.

## **1.3 ABSTRACT VERSUS MORPHO-SYNTACTIC CASE**

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### 1.3.1 Abstract and Morphologically Realized Case

One very important distinction that we have to bear in mind is between **morpho-syntactic** and **abstract** case. In many languages,

the form of a noun (and possibly its associates) varies depending on the syntactic position in which it appears / the grammatical function it fulfills / the thematic relation in which it stands to other elements in the sentence, etc. For instance, the form of the subject differs from that of the object, the form of the direct object differs from that of the indirect object, and so on. In other words, case distinctions are reflected in the morpho-phonological properties of the nominal. To illustrate, in Russian, the DP *Masha* appears in the nominative case form (*Masha*) when it occupies the subject position of a finite clause (11a), in the accusative form (*Mashu*) in the object position (11b) and in the dative form (*Mashe*) when it functions as an indirect object (oblique complement) of the verb *dat'* 'give' (11 c).<sup>3</sup>

## (11) RUSSIAN

- a. **Maša** učit lingvistiku.  
 Masha<sub>NOM</sub> studies linguistics<sub>ACC</sub>  
 'Masha studies linguistics.'
- b. Dima poceloval **Mašu**.  
 Dima<sub>NOM</sub> kissed Masha<sub>ACC</sub>  
 'Dima kissed Masha.'
- c. Ivan dal **Maše** knigu.  
 Ivan<sub>NOM</sub> gave Masha<sub>DAT</sub> book<sub>ACC</sub>  
 'Ivan gave Masha a book.'

Languages in which nominals exhibit this kind of paradigm have morphologically reflected case and are sometimes referred to as *case languages*. It is worth noting that while in Russian, case is morphologically realized via suffixation, other case languages use additional devices. Suffixation is indeed quite widespread; however, some languages use, e.g. case prefixes or case clitics.<sup>4</sup>

In English, unlike Russian, exactly the same form of the DP is found in the subject, object and oblique positions (unless this DP is a pronoun):

## (12) ENGLISH

- a. **John** studies linguistics.  
 b. Mary kissed John.  
 c. Mary gave a book to **John**.

<sup>3</sup> (11) does not illustrate the complete case paradigm, but rather only provides several examples.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, under Caha's (2009) approach, case is realized as a suffix, rather than a prefix, only if the nominal constituent undergoes movement.