

## THE CASE HIERARCHY

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Morphological case systems range from two members to a dozen or so. If one takes all the combinations of orientation markers and case markers proper in some Balto-Finnic and Daghestan languages as cases, then the figure runs to forty or so (see below). The question addressed here is whether morphological case systems grow and decay in a certain order. In attempting to answer this question I shall consider first case marking on independent nominals and ignore bound pronouns and word order. However, bound pronouns and word order are relevant to morphological case in that they represent alternative ways of encoding grammatical relations that lie at the top end of the relational hierarchy and therefore preclude the possibility of what otherwise might be implicational relationships. One might consider that a peripheral case like ablative is not likely to be found in an accusative language unless a core case like accusative is also found, but this will not hold in a language where the object is represented pronominally in the verb or only by position after the verb. Similarly one might propose that a language will not have a comitative case (which is only moderately common across languages) unless it has a genitive (which would appear to be more common), but a possessor in many languages is represented by a bound pronoun standing, where necessary, in cross-reference with a noun as in Warndarang (Northern Australian) (Heath 1980).

Comparing cases across languages is problematic from the methodological point of view. If we compare non-isomorphic case systems, then strictly no case in one system will correspond with any case in the other system. The dative in Ancient Greek, for instance, does not correspond closely with the dative of Latin. Greek lacked the ablative of Latin and the source function ('from') of the Latin ablative was expressed by the genitive, while the locative and instrumental functions of the Latin ablative were expressed by the dative. The Greek dative is a more comprehensive case than the Latin dative. So in comparing cases across languages we need to consider the functions covered by a particular case and we must not accept traditional labels at face value.

If we look at a sample of case systems, ignoring for the moment those languages where some relations are marked exclusively by bound pronouns or word order, we find that indeed they do tend to be built up in a particular order, i.e. a hierarchy emerges.

(1) nom            acc/erg    gen            dat            bc            abl/instr    others

This hierarchy is to be interpreted as follows. If a language has a case listed on the hierarchy, it will usually have at least one case from each position to the left. Thus if a language has a dative case it will have a genitive, an accusative or ergative or both, and a nominative. In a small system of two, three, four or five cases the lowest ranked case will usually have a large range of functions, i.e. it will be a kind of 'elsewhere case'. The hierarchy as it is presented in (1) gives the impression that a language could have a two-case system in which the non-nominative case was accusative or ergative. While it is true that the second case is likely to cover O or A function, it is also likely to cover such a wide range of functions that the label *obi* would be more appropriate than accusative or ergative.

A number of languages have a two-case system. Chemehuevi, a language of the Numic branch of Uto-Aztecan, has a nominative-oblique system in which nominative marks subject and oblique marks object and possessor. There are also postpositions which attach directly to the stem and perhaps could be said to belong to the case system, but unlike the oblique case marker they cannot figure in concord (Press 1979). A nominative-oblique system plus postpositions is typical of the Uto-Aztecan family (Langacker 1977).

Kabardian (northwest Caucasian) has a two-case system in which the marked case covers A and possessor function. Two-case systems are also found among the Iranian languages. Yaghnobi has both an accusative construction and an ergative construction, the latter used in tenses based on the past stem. Within the core the marked case is used for a specific direct object in the accusative construction and for A in the ergative construction. Outside the core marked case is used for possessor, indirect object and object of a preposition (Comrie 1981: 169-70).

In a three-case system there is a nominative, an accusative and a genitive/oblique. The Semitic languages have systems like this. Classical Arabic provides an example, though there is accusative-genitive syncretism in the plural. The Nubian languages (Nilo-Saharan) also have a nominative-accusative-genitive system. Modern Greek has a nominative-accusative-genitive system and so has Comanche (Uto-Aztecan) (Robinson & Armagost 1990). Greek also has a vocative, but a vocative is not considered a case here. It does not have the function of a case; its claim to being a case is structural, the vocative filling the same slot in word structure as the true cases. In some languages where there is no case system there are special forms of nouns used in address, but these are not taken to be cases.

As the hierarchy in (1) stands it would appear that a three-case system could contain nominative, accusative and ergative. Accusative and ergative cannot be separated on the hierarchy, but as far as I know both occur only when another lower case is present.

A number of languages have the following four-case system,

(2) nom            ace            gen            dat/obl

The last case often has a variety of functions as is variously named. Languages with this system include Ancient Greek (which also had a vocative), a number of Germanic languages including German, Icelandic and Old English (where there was also a vestigial instrumental), Yaqui and several Nilo-Saharan languages including Fur, Nuer and languages of the Didinga-Murle group where the accusative rather than the nominative is unmarked.

The next case to be distinguished from the elsewhere case is the dative. In Latin, for instance, we have the following system of five cases (plus a vocative),

(3) nom            ace            gen            dat            abl/obl

The lowest case in Latin is called the ablative, but the Latin ablative represents a syncretism of an earlier ablative, instrumental and locative (still vestigially distinguishable). The label is somewhat arbitrary. Old and Middle High German had a similar system with an 'instrumental' where Latin had an 'ablative'. The O.H.G. and M.H.G. instrumental expressed locative and ablative functions as well as instrumental.

The only other case that can be placed on the hierarchy with any confidence is the locative. Systems of six or more cases almost always have a locative. In a number of Slavonic languages including Polish, Czech, Slovak and Serbo-Croatian the following system is found,

(4) nom            ace            gen            dat            loc            instr/abl

The next cases for consideration are the ablative and the instrumental. It does not seem that they can be distinguished hierarchically. Both are quite common, and there are languages with an instrumental but no ablative (like the Slavonic languages where source is normally expressed by a preposition governing the genitive) and there are languages like the Altaic languages where there is an ablative but no instrumental. The case system in Turkish is as follows. The instrumental function is expressed by a postposition.

(5) nom            ace            gen            dat            loc            abl

Some Altaic languages have both an instrumental and an ablative as does classical Armenian which reflects the system of proto-Indo-European minus the vocative,

(6) nom ace gen dat loc abl instr

It is doubtful whether the hierarchy can be developed much further. Outside the cases discussed up to this point the most common would appear to be the comitative ('accompanying'), the purposive, the allative ('to'), the perlativ ('through') and the comparative ('than'). Tamil, for instance has the seven cases listed in (6) plus the comitative (called sociative in Dravidian linguistics),

(7) nom ace gen dat loc abl instr com

Two other Dravidian languages, Toda (Sakthivel 1976:435-48) and Irula (Perialwar 1976:495-519) have a purposive as well (plus a vocative),

(8) nom ace gen dat bc abl instr corn purp

Dravidian languages mostly have largish case systems. Kodaga (Balakrishnan 1976:421- 34) and Kasaba(Chidambaranathan 1976:467-80) also have a comparative ('than') case.

The Pama-Nyungan languages of Australia mostly have case systems with eight to ten members. There is normally a common case for A and for instrumental function, most often referred to as the ergative, and there is frequently an allative and often an evitative (indicating what is to be avoided). Some Pama-Nyungan languages lack a genitive, the possessor function being expressed via the dative (Blake 1977, 1987).

Case systems ranging from the minimum number of two up to ten or so are reasonably common. Where systems with well over ten occur as in the Finno-Ugric and Northeast Caucasian languages they always involve cases that combine the notions of location, source, destination and sometimes path with notions of spatial orientation such as inside, outside, on top of, etc. The following example is from Archi (adapted from Kibrik 199 1:256),

TABLE 1. Partial paradigm of Archi *qlin* 'bridge'

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>qlin</i>	<i>qlonn-or</i>
Ergative	<i>qlinn-i</i>	<i>qlonn-or-čaj</i>
Genitive	<i>qlinn-i-n</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-n</i>
Dative	<i>qlinn-i-s</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-s</i>
Comitative	<i>qlinn-i-ʃu</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-ʃu</i>
Comparative	<i>qlinn-i-Xur</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-Xur</i>
Super-essive	<i>qlinn-i-t</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-t</i>
Super-elative	<i>qlinn-i-ʃi-š</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-ʃi-š</i>
Super-lative	<i>qlinn-i-ʃi-k</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-ʃi-k</i>
Sub-essive	<i>qlinn-i-L'</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-L'</i>
Sub-elative	<i>qlinn-i-L'a-š</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-L'a-š</i>
Sub-lative	<i>qlinn-i-L'a-k</i>	<i>qlonn-or-če-L'a-k</i>

In systems of this type the orientation marker always occurs closer to the base than the case marker proper does. If one takes the orientation marker in Archi to be a stem-forming element, then the case system comprises ten members (nominative, ergative, genitive, dative, comitative, comparative, essive (= locative), elative (= ablative), allative and translative (= perlativ). Almost all the big case systems are agglutinative and if we dismiss the orientation marker as a case marker and reduce the size of the paradigm, the biggest systems remaining will be those where fusion of the orientation marker and case marker proper precludes dismissing the orientation marker. This has happened in Finnish where there are fifteen cases, nine of them local.

In illustrating the hierarchy I have so far avoided languages which encode grammatical relations solely by word order or by bound pronouns, since the use of these alternative mechanisms can mean there are gaps in the morphological case hierarchy. However, the use of word order as the sole means of distinguishing subject and object is practically confined to SVO prepositional languages like French, Cambodian and Thai. The only real competitor for morphological case is the use of bound pronouns. Bound pronouns may be used for subject, object, indirect object and possessor, and in some ergative languages for the absolutive and ergative relations. Naturally there will be gaps where bound pronouns are used instead of morphological case. In Nanai (Tungusic), for instance, there are seven cases but no genitive, the possessor relation being expressed by a cross-referencing bound pronoun (Nichols 1983),

(9)    nom        acc        —        dat        loc        abl        instr    all

Northern Australian languages have cross-referencing for subject and object and some have no core case marking. In Warndarang, for instance, the case inventory is as follows (Heath 1980:26-28),

(10) nom        loc        abl        instr    all        purp

The missing cases are genitive, dative and a second core case, ergative or accusative. All of these gaps can be accounted for by reference to the cross-referencing bound pronouns which encode subject, object and possessor. With the verb for 'give' the object series of bound pronouns encodes the recipient. There is also a verbal prefix *ma-* to indicate that the object series is encoding a beneficiary. In this way the functions that would be associated with a dative are covered.

If morphological case systems are built up on hierarchical lines and if most of the gaps in the hierarchy can be attributed to the use of bound pronouns, then morphological cases and systems of bound pronouns between them define a hierarchy of functions or relations. It seems languages place more importance on having some morpho-syntactic means of expressing relations such as subject and object than on having some morpho-syntactic means of expressing relations such as locative or instrumental. Lower ranked relations like these are more often expressed via prepositions or postpositions. Adpositions, although forming closed classes of some dozens or perhaps some scores of members, are essentially lexical rather than grammatical.

There are instances where a number of functions are expressed by a single case. As mentioned above it is not uncommon in Australian languages to find a genitive-dative case and in Kannada there is neutralisation of the ablative/instrumental distinction even though there is a comitative which one would expect to be ranked lower on the grounds of its sparser distribution across languages. In Tarascan (Chibchan) there is also a comitative even though there is no dative or ablative. In this language there is no indirect object; the recipient and beneficiary are expressed in the accusative. The locative covers not only location, but the other local notions such as 'from' and 'to' (Suarez 1983:87),

(11) nom          arc          gen          loc          instr          com

The fact that neutralisations occur and gaps, mostly attributable to an alternative grammatical device, precludes the possibility of establishing implicational relationships between cases, but the neutralisations and gaps do not render the hierarchy vacuous. Case systems tend to be built up in a certain sequence ‘with overwhelmingly greater than chance frequency’, to borrow a phrase from Greenberg (1963).

On the point of one case expressing more than one function, it is interesting to note an asymmetry between the treatment of ablative and allative. An ablative is much more widely distributed than an allative. The to-function is frequently expressed by another case such as the accusative (Latin and some other Indo-European), the dative (Turkish and other Altaic) or the locative (Yidiny). Of course instances like these where a case expresses more than one function or role raise the question of how these cases are labelled. It seems that it is widely accepted practice to label on the basis of the higher function on the hierarchy. Where a particular case expresses say A function and instrumental function, it is usually labelled ergative. This practice will of course create apparent gaps in the hierarchy at the point where the lower function occurs.

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