

“Quirky case”: cross-linguistically rare phenomena in case-marking

The talk addresses cross-linguistically rare phenomena in case-marking focussing on its distributional and functional aspects rather than on formal ones (an example of the latter is the “tonal case” as attested in a number of African languages). Starting from Blake’s (2001) definition of case I address deviations from the case prototype. These deviations may concern morphological distribution of cases. Apart from better known phenomena, such as “double case” (Plank (ed.) 1995), these include “distributed case” where cases appear in different morphological slots (as in Koasati) or when cases can be alternatively marked on the noun, or on the verb (as in Abkhaz). Although it is common to speak of head-marking of grammatical relations or case functions (Nichols 1992), Abkhaz is unusual in that the same markers appear alternatively either as adpositions or as verbal directional prefixes. A deviant case of case distribution on the clausal level is found in Iraqw, where case suffixes may attach to a ‘wrong’ NP.

Turning to functional properties of cases, the paper discusses a number of cross-linguistically unusual functions, such as “presentational case” in Samoan, “background case” in Iraqw, “modal ablative” in a number of Australian languages, which cannot be readily assigned a better known case label. It also discusses languages where the use of a case is restricted to certain derived constructions, as the causee case in Nivkh or the second genitive in Yakut that is restricted to constructions with stacked possessors. The designative case, as found in some Tungusic languages, represents a deviation from the iconic form-function mapping, as the single case assigns two different grammatical functions, that of Theme to its host NP, and of Beneficiary to the possessor of the host NP. Finally, I shall discuss the side-effects of case-marking pertaining to lexical categorization. It is not unusual that a case performs the nominalizing function, as for example, in Nahali, or the adjectivizing function, as genitive-like cases, involved in double case patterns. More rare are cases when application of case has the verbalizing effect, indeed Kayardild appears to be the only language with the phenomenon of “verbal case”.

Finally, I shall address cross-linguistically unusual case-marking patterns, such as marked nominatives and absolutes (also discussed in the “Rara-collection” of the Universals Archives), pronominal ergatives (as found in some Iranian languages, discussed by Filimonova 2005, but also in some Mande languages), cases when differential object marking pattern extends to (intransitive) subjects (as in case of Central Pomo and Niuean), as well as cases of “global” case-marking that cannot be reduced to issues of distinguishability (as in Chepang, where only volitional As take the O in the objective case). It will be shown that many of these unusual patterns are the outcomes of different functional motivations, as familiar from the functional-typological literature, or result from interaction of functional motivations with universal grammaticalization processes.