Case morphology from a dynamic perspective: an insight from the Estonian data

Case morphology, particularly argument marking, is normally taken to reflect syntax. Accordingly, overt case morphology tends to be analysed as syntactic dependency marking, rendering morphology a role of a marker, 'linker' (in lexicon-oriented approaches), or something which may be 'spelled-out' but need not to (in the generative approach). That is, morphology tends to be treated as grammatically trivial. We show that this approach to overt case marking is problematic, since it leaves sets of data in Estonian (Finnic) unexplained.

In Estonian (for a similar data in Finnish, see, e.g., Nelson 1995, Kiparsky 1998, 2001), the partitive case on the direct object is taken to express imperfectivity of the predicate in one type of constructions, and indeterminate quantity of the case-marked nominal in other type of constructions. It is also associated with negative polarity item (Kiparsky 1998, Kaiser 2003), or marking temporality (EKK 2007). Previously unnoticed is the data where partitive can freely vary with the other alternating cases (either genitive or nominative) so that no (significant) difference in interpretation is given rise to; or the partitive case occurs on the object in constructions which denote definite entity and perfective event (Vaiss 2004). These instances are the key to understanding the role of overt case marking: the interpretation of case morphology seems to depend on context, that is, on the nominal it marks and the predicate with which it is associated.

Current natural-language grammars do not allow incorporating context-dependency in a grammar formalism, apart from Dynamic Syntax (Cann et al. 2005). Dynamic syntax provides a framework which directly relies on context in building up representations of interpretations, in a parsing-like manner. When adopting this dynamic approach, the role of case morphology becomes absolutely essential to a grammar: overt case marking attains an "active" role of projecting information and/or providing constraints on building a representation of interpretation, rather than being a "passive" dependency marker. For this central role of morphological case, one has to specify what information each case marker contributes, both in terms of syntax and semantics. For the semantically conditioned case variation in the object marking, one needs to identify what information is actually expressed and what is not (i.e. inferred instead). Thus what becomes central in such a model is *how* case morphology, with its informational content, interacts with context (e.g. the case-marked term, the verb, etc.) in building up interpretation. The paper illustrates such a role of overt case morphology on the basis of data from Estonian, and although the focus is on grammatical cases, the hypotheses put forward pertain to the whole case system.

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