

## Notes on Case Theory

## I. Case types and Case licensing

Case Licensing: All Case is licensed by heads, in either a spec-head or c-command configuration, subject to locality.

There are two types of Case.

These are traditionally called structural and non-structural (lexical/ inherent/ quirky).

This is a bit misleading in that all Cases are 'structural', since all Case licensing is by heads in a structural configuration.

Structural Cases are licensed in a purely structural way.

Non-structural Cases are licensed in connection with theta-licensing.

## 1. Structural Case

Structural Case is licensed in syntax, with no reference to thematic roles.

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Nominative | licensed by Infl (Tense)                                  |
| Accusative | licensed by Aspect or V (theory is not yet clear on this) |
| Genitive   | licensed by D   |

English has only structural Case: *he* nom      *him* acc      *his* genitive

## 2. Non-structural Case:

Non-structural Case is licensed at an earlier point, along with theta licensing.

This earlier level used to be called D-Structure. Now it is called argument structure or the vP phase.

Because non-structural Cases are licensed first, they can take priority over structural Cases.

That is, if an object gets dative Case along with its goal theta role, it will keep that dative, instead of taking the accusative Case normally licensed to an object in syntax.

|     |                          |          |         |                    |
|-----|--------------------------|----------|---------|--------------------|
| (7) | Fjölskyldan              | hjálpaði | þér.    | [Icelandic]        |
|     | family-NOM               | helped   | you-DAT |                    |
|     | 'The family helped you.' |          |         | (Jónsson 1996:105) |

Non-structural Cases divide into two types: inherent and lexical.

The inherent Cases (ergative and dative) are more regular and predictable.

The lexical Cases (lexical accusative, dative, genitive, ...) are not predictable.

## 2.1 Lexical Case (idiosyncratic/quirky Case)

In some languages, individual verbs and prepositions can lexically select a particular Case for a theme.

- (1) Bátnum hvolfdi. [Icelandic]  
boat-DAT capsized  
'The boat capsized.' (Levin and Simpson 1981 (1b))
- (2) Bátinn rak á land.  
boat-ACC drifted to shore  
'The boat drifted to the shore.' (Jónsson 2003 (66a))

## 2.2 Inherent Case (Theta Based Case)

Inherent Case is the more regular type of non-structural Case. Inherent Cases correlate with with theta roles (more accurately, they correspond with argument structure positions).

There are two inherent Cases: ergative and dative

Ergative marks agents.

Dative marks goals and many experiencers.

In a sentence with the verb 'give', many languages mark the agent subject with ergative, the goal indirect object with dative. (The theme does not usually get a non-structural Case.)

He-ergative gave me-dative the book.

Experiencer subjects often take dative Case: He-dative likes her.

## 3. The Theory of Non-Structural Case Licensing

Non-structural Case is licensed at vP structure (the vP phase).

Much recent work is converging on the following picture of vP structure, with an external argument (agent) licensed by a little v (standard view) and probably another little v below it marking DP (not PP) goals and experiencers.

- (9)
- 
- ```
graph TD
    vP1[vP] --- external-erg[external-erg]
    vP1 --- vP2[vP]
    vP2 --- v2[v]
    vP2 --- vP3[vP]
    vP3 --- goal-exp-dat[goal/exp-dat]
    vP3 --- VP[VP]
    VP --- v3[v]
    VP --- V[V]
    V --- theme[theme]
```
- External argument in Spec vP, licensed by v  
(Hung 1988, Kratzer 1996, Chomsky 1995)
- Direct argument goals/experiencer in a lower vP  
(McGinnis (1996, 1998, 2001), building on Marantz 1989)

The upper little v licenses ergative Case to the external argument (Legate 2006, Massam 2002, Woolford 1997, 2006).

- (7) Raam-ne roTii khaayii thii. [Hindi]  
 Ram-ERG bread-NOM.FEM eat(perf, fem) be(past,fem)  
 ‘Ram had eaten bread.’ (Mahajan 1990, 73)
- (8) Gizona-k kurritu du. [Basque]  
 man-ERG ran 3sg-aux  
 ‘The man ran.’ (Levin 1989:57)

The lower little v licenses dative Case to direct argument goals/experiencers (McGinnis (1996, 1998, 2001), Woolford 2006).

- (4) Eirík-i líkar þetta hús. [Icelandic]  
 Eric-DAT likes this house-NOM  
 ‘Eric likes this house.’ (Jónsson 2003:141)
- (5) Siitaa-ko laRke pasand the. [Hindi]  
 Sita-DAT boys-NOM,MASC like be(past,masc.pl)  
 ‘Sita liked the boys.’ (Mahajan 1991 (7))
- (6) Ni-ri zure oinetako-a-k-Ø gustatzen zaizkit. [Basque]  
 I-DAT your shoes-det-NOM like aux  
 ‘I like your shoes.’ (Austin and Lopez 1995:12)
- (7) Fjölskyldan hjálpaði þér.  
 family-NOM helped you-DAT  
 ‘The family helped you.’ (Jónsson 1996:105)

Generalization: Regular, inherent Cases: licensed only by little v heads  
 Irregular, lexical Cases: licensed by lexical heads: V, P

Some Parallels Between ergative and dative Case: Woolford (1997, 2006)

- .both are theta-related (ergative marks external arguments; dative marks goals/experiencers)
- .dative and ergative Case are preserved under NP Movement (e.g. to Spec IP or raising)
- .no argument changes to dative or ergative under NP Movement
- .dative and/or ergative Case are limited to transitives in some languages, but not others  
 (datives are limited to transitives in Basque and Hindi)
- .dative and ergative subjects occur with nominative objects in many languages

#### 4. Abstract and Morphological Case

All argument DPs get abstract Case. Abstract Case is a feature in syntax.

Morphological Case is the morphological spell-out of abstract Case at PF.

Diagnostic: Abstract Case may affect agreement; morphological Case cannot affect agreement.