A Constraint-Based Typology of Case Systems

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by

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes an Optimality-Theoretic [OT] (Prince and Smolensky 1993) account of case systems and explores its typological scope, with a particular focus on four accusative languages, Korean, Japanese, Icelandic, and Imbabura Quechua. There are three major claims to be made here. First, the typological variation of case systems is derived from re-ranking of a small number of individually simple constraints which conflict with each other (cf. Legendre et al. 1993). Second, cases (including oblique ones) may best be licensed with reference to a two-tiered system of semantic roles, thematic relations and macroroles, developed within the framework of Role and Reference Grammar [RRG] (Van Valin 1993, Van Valin and LaPolla in press). Third, the OT-RRG account may not only handle regular case frames, but also irregular ones displayed by those four languages mentioned above. The latter two claims are improvements over Legendre et al. (1993), the first OT account of case systems.

The bulk of the dissertation follows in Chapters 3-6 after an introduction to OT and RRG in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 is devoted to making the first and second claims, while Chapters 4-6 substantiate the third claim on the basis of Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 proposes a universal set of constraints for nominative, accusative, ergative, and dative case assignment after a critical examination of the previous RRG literature, Van Valin (1991) and Van Valin and LaPolla (in press), and defines the major case systems, e.g. accusative, ergative, active, in terms of their ranking. It is also shown in Chapter 3 how to extend the proposal from those four basic cases to oblique cases with a particular focus on instrumental case in English, Russian, Japanese, and Korean. Chapter 3 closes with a discussion of how to restrict the range of constraint ranking.

Chapters 4-6 apply the OT-RRG case theory outlined in Chapter 3 to a selected set of constructions in Japanese, Korean, Icelandic, and Imbabura Quechua whose irregular case frames have presented a serious challenge to contemporary syntactic theories. Chapter
4 shows that the association between thematic relations and macroroles serves as the basis for case assignment of psych verbs in Japanese, in support of the claim made in Chapter 3 that cases are licensed with reference to a combination of thematic relations and macroroles.

Chapter 5 focuses on "case spreading" and "case stacking" in the four languages. It is proposed that they all involve a multiple association between thematic relations and macroroles, which follow the same set of principles employed in non-linear phonology (see Archangeli 1984 and Goldsmith 1990, for example) and that these two phenomena are also amenable to the OT-RRG case theory.

Chapter 6 investigates case alternations exhibited by a variety of constructions which fall under the label of raising/ascension, i.e. subject-to-object raising and subject-to-subject raising constructions in Icelandic and possessor raising and light verb constructions in Korean. Specifically, it is proposed that possessor raising and light verb constructions involve more than one logical structure (to which thematic relations are assigned) that is associated with a single set of macroroles. This multiple association explains why more than one NP may receive the same case, nominative, accusative, or dative case in those two constructions in Korean.

Chapter 7 concludes this dissertation, noting three areas for further research, accusative/nominative cases marking adverbial NPs which express path, duration, and frequency, case frames exhibited by complex predicate constructions, particularly causative constructions, and a detailed analysis of ergative and active case systems.
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