Structural case and dependency marking:
a neo-Jakobsonian view

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1. Proposal

(1) Structural objective (accusative) case is the morphological reflex of a higher order
dependency between the subject and its sister (‘the predicate’).

(2)

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
  \node (subject) {subject};
  \node (predicate) [right of=subject] {predicate};
  \node (object) [below right of=predicate] {object};
  \draw (subject) -- (predicate);
  \draw (predicate) -- (object);
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

(3) So not:
   a. expression of a verb-complement dependency
      b. function of construal with a functional head (AgrO)
      c. function of construal with the agentive element (little v)

2. Why?

2.1 The notion ‘object’

(4) Dissociation of thematic roles (int/ext argument) and grammatical functions (subject/object):
a. John was arrested (subject + int.arg.)
b. We saw them arrest John (object + ext.arg.)

(5) Separation of object from V (obligatory object shift = A-movement, VandenWyngaerd 1989)
   ..dat we hem niet zagen (Dutch)
   dat we:NOM him:ACC not saw
   ‘..that we didn’t see him.’

(6) Absence of a licenser in the middle field:
   ..dat ze hem niet schijnt te kennen (Dutch)
   dat they:NOM him:ACC not seems to know:INF
   ‘..that she doesn’t seem to know him.’

(7) Absence of a licenser in copula constructions:
   Jij bent hem (Dutch)
   you:NOM are:2SG him:ACC

   NB, accusative is not the default nor the emphatic form
(7’) Wie heeft dat gedaan? Hij/*Hem!
   who did that? he:NOM/he:ACC
(8) Direct object mutation (soft mutation = SM) in Welsh:
   a. prynodd y ddynes feic / *beic
      bought the woman SMbike / bike
      ‘the woman bought a bike’
   b. roedd y ddynes yn prynu beic / *feic
      was the woman PROG buy:INF bike / SMbike
      ‘the woman was buying a bike’

Status quaestionis: a. restricted to direct objects and verbal nouns, hence case-marking (Zwicky 1984, Roberts 1997)
   b. triggered only in the absence of the verb (i.e. in VSO), hence conditioned by adjacent XP (Harlow 1989, Borsley & Tallerman 1996)

a. and b. are compatible if (1) is right: a phonological realization of case may be subject to an additional condition of adjacency of the triggering element (the subject). Hence case shows up only if the verb is out of the way.

2.2 Dependency relations in general

(9) Subject agreement may be realized on a range of predicate-internal elements:

a. adjacent verb/auxiliary
   Jan wandel-t in het bos
   John walk-3SG in the forest
   ‘John is walking in the forest.’

b. nonadjacent verb/auxiliary
   John rarely walk-s in the forest
   ‘John rarely walks in the forest.’

..dat Jan in het bos wandel-t
that John in the forest walk-3SG
‘that John is walking in the forest.’

..dat Jan in het bos wandel-t
that John in the forest walk-3SG
‘that John is walking in the forest.’

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that John in the forest walk-3SG
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..dat Jan in het bos wandel-t
that John in the forest walk-3SG
‘that John is walking in the forest.’

..dat Jan in het bos wandel-t
that John in the forest walk-3SG
‘that John is walking in the forest.’
(f) objects
na-pa-xa’m a-p-sa’ apa’-m ux’a’l’ tukwe’-m xa’-pa-ču’ san
1SG-soul DEM-2AGRS sky DEM-2AGRS 2SU-SUB-carry FUT
‘(that) you will carry my soul to heaven’
(Coahuitlęco)

(10)

subject  →  predicate

dependency

relation

auxiliary  verb  adverb  object  pronoun

dependency
realizations

(11) Similarly with the expression of reflexivity

a. object
John saw himself
(English)

en tooñ-ii koye men
we harm-ASP heads our
‘We have harmed ourselves.’

abono-ra na-noki-a’-a-ha
self-OBJ CAUS-see-DETRANS-ASP-THEME
‘He sees himself.’

b. nonthematic element
das Buch liest sich gut
the book reads SE good
‘The book reads well.’

c. pronoun/clitic
nrā dreghe-nrī fadre rroto
3SG.SU injure-3SG.OB with car
‘He injured himself in a car.’

d. verb
Juma a-li-ji-pend-a
Juma, 1-PAST-REFL-love-FV
‘Juma loved himself.’

e. auxiliary
Yehpe nochi
Y-ehpe n-oœh-i
3SG:DISTPAST-do.reflexively NOM-see-OB:3SG
‘He/she saw him/herself.’
3. Jakobson on the system of cases

(12) *Jakobson* (1935)
   a. Case is morphology, not syntax
   b. Cases are organized in marked/unmarked oppositions (*paradigm*)
   c. Cases have a *Gesamtbedeutung* (core meaning) and a *Hauptbedeutung* (principal meaning)

(13) *Jakobson on the accusative* (1935 [1966:57, 60])
   a. The meaning of the accusative is so closely associated with the action, that it may only be governed by a verb (*Hauptbedeutung*)
   b. The accusative by itself signifies that some element is ranked higher on the hierarchy of grammatical functions [Satzbedeutungen], i.e. unlike the nominative, it conveys the existence of such a hierarchy [*Gesamtbedeutung*]

(14) The accusative is the morphological expression of dependency w.r.t. the subject.

(15) Minimalist implementation: upon merger of the subject, the predicate is marked as a dependent of the subject, which may be expressed (among other ways) by case on the object.

(16) Since case = morphology, expression of the dependency is subject to the organization of the forms in a paradigm (there has to be a subject/object form opposition, i.e. a *structural case opposition*).

4. Consequences for ergativity

4.1 The core case

(17) Subject: inherent case ➔ Object default case

(18) *Icelandic*
   a. hann lamdi hana
      he:NOM hit her:ACC
      ‘He hit her.’

   • subject-predicate dependency
   • subject has structural case ➔ structural case opposition available
   • object realizes dependency via marked structural case (accusative)
b. honum þraut þróttur
hím:DAT lacked strength:NOM
‘He lacked strength.’

- subject-predicate dependency
- subject has inherent case ➔ no structural case opposition available
- object does not realize dependency, gets unmarked case (nominative)

(19) **Inuit**

a. Qimmi-p angut kii-v-a-a
dog-ERG man:ABS bite-IND-TR-3SG.3SG
‘The dog bit the man.’

b. Angut qungujup-p-u-q
man:ABS smile-IND-INTR-3SG
‘The man smiled.’


- no structural case opposition available
- object realized in the default case (absolutive = nominative)

(21) What is special about ergativity is the (quite general) use of an inherent subject case, the object case-marking follows a regular pattern.

(22) Other ways of subject-predicate dependency marking still available:

a. **agreement**
ngajulu-rlu ka-rna-ngku nyuntu mya-nyi (Warlpiri)
I-ERG AUX:PRES-1SG.SU-2SG.OB you:ABS see-NONPAST
‘I see you.’

b. **reflexivity**
ngarrka-ngku ka-nyanu nya-nyi (Warlpiri)
man-ERG PRES-REFL see-NONPAST
‘The man sees himself.’

(23) *Why* and *when* the subject has inherent/ergative case is a separate matter.
(common factors: transitivity, agentivity)

### 4.2 Tripartite case systems

(24) yūnlů-tu taykka-ŋa pūyan
man-ERG woman-ACC hit
‘The man hit the woman.’

cf. taykka yat’tuwan
woman:NOM screamed
‘The woman screamed.’

(25) the accusative appears with [+animate] or [-abstract] entities only (Schebeck 1976:544 note 5)

(26) The tripartite system appears in a subset of the languages with NP-split ergativity
NP-split ergativity

Semi-sensitive to [animacy]: 1 > 2 > 3/DEM > proper N > common N
[human > animate > inanimate]

Dyirbal: full NPs (from Dixon 1994:10, noun markers omitted)
a. ñuma banaga-n'u
   father:ABS return-NONFUT
   'Father returned.'

b. ñuma yabu-ŋu bura-n
   father:ABS mother-ERG see-NONFUT
   'Mother saw father.'

Dyirbal: pronouns (from Dixon 1994:14)
a. ñana banaga-n'u
   we all:NOM return-NONFUT
   'We returned.'

b. n'urra ñana-na bura-n
   you all:NOM we all:ACC see-NONFUT
   'You all saw us.'

Combination of [high animacy] with [low animacy] participants yields hybrid system.

Kham

a. ge:-i em-tó mi:-r-ô ge-ma-ra dai-ye
   we-NOM road-ON person-PL-ABS 1PL-NEG-3PL-find-IMPF
   'We met no people on the way.'

b. gē:h ye ña-lai duhp-na-ke-o
   ox-ERG I-ACC butt-1SG-PERF-3SG
   'The ox butted me.'

System of object marking in split-NP languages (+ = 'high', ! = 'low'):

a. [+animate] marks dependency regardless the status of the subject
b. !-animate marks dependency only if
   (i) subject has structural case (the ergative mechanism) and
   (ii) subject is in the same animacy class

Jakobsonian principle: dependency marking is sensitive to paradigm membership
paradigms = (i) structural vs. inherent; (ii) high vs. low animate

Partial split system: Waga-Waga

a. bugin'-du (ŋ)i-na iya:-u
   dog-ERG thou-ACC bite-FUT
   'The dog will bite you.'

b. ŋa-d'u ŋunam-ma n'a-ŋi guyum-ba
   I-ERG children-ACC see-PAST camp-LOC
   'I saw the children in the camp.'
(35) [+animate] = pronouns, proper names, human beings, some other living beings

(36) Transitive subject always gets inherent (ergative) case; object case assignment not affected ➔ (32)

(37) Generalizations
   a. the nature of the verb plays no role in the ABS/ACC-choice for the object
   b. ABS/ACC-choice depends solely on the question whether subject and object are in
      the same paradigm (structural/inherent) or animacy class

5. Conclusion

(38) Structural case within the clause
   a. nondependent element (subject): NOM
   b. dependent element (predicate): ACC, realized on an NP-term of the predicate

Sources and references


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