

Constraining the use of composite case categories

Where a series of morphosyntactic contexts varies only in the value for a single feature category, handling syncretism poses a challenge. E.g. German *der* can appear in two contexts that differ only in terms of case – dative singular feminine and genitive singular feminine of the definite article. We could take the form to be simply underspecified for case, hence the default for the singular feminine. However, there is also *die* – the nominative singular feminine and accusative singular feminine definite article. This form cannot also be underspecified for case, since the two would then be indistinguishable, so another solution is required. The standard one since Jakobson (1936) is to analyze case categories like nominative as bundles of cross-classifying features, and then to employ underspecification of the component features. In the influential version of this idea proposed for German by Bierwisch (1967), nominative is [-oblique, -governed], genitive [+oblique, -governed], dative [+oblique, +governed] and accusative [-oblique, +governed]. For him, *die* is simply [-oblique], syncretic for nominative and accusative because it is underspecified for [\pm governed].

Such an approach to case syncretism has been widely adopted in recent theoretical work (see e.g. Calabrese, 1996; Halle, 1997; Wunderlich, 2003; Müller, 2004), but it faces an important difficulty. Proposals of underspecification for features like person and number are inherently constrained by the clear semantic analogs of those features – we may argue about the details of the featural representation of the 2nd person, but there is essentially no disagreement about what forms and contexts it should characterize. This is not so with the component features proposed for case categories. The assumption of features like [+governed] has been motivated almost entirely by the patterns of syncretism they can model, and little has been said explicitly about how they should relate to the syntax or semantics. As a result, there is nothing in principle to prevent us from proposing any imaginable set of abstract features underlying a given case system. This in turn means that we cannot make strong predictions about what sorts of patterns of syncretism should be attested. E.g. German has no syncretisms singling out nominative and dative or genitive and accusative, and Bierwisch's proposed set of features models this. However, this is only because he chose those features to accord with those patterns – nothing in the theory predicts that particular inventory over one that could describe nominative-dative syncretisms. It comes out as an arbitrary fact of German morphology that nominative and accusative are often syncretic while nominative and dative are not. There are two reasons, however, to think that this is a principled distinction. First, while there is wide cross-linguistic variation, syncretism between subject and object cases is significantly more common than that between subject case and non-core cases (Baerman, Brown, and Corbett, 2005). Second, the morphological connection between nominative and accusative correlates with a syntactic one: they alternate with one another (e.g. in the passive 1 and causative 2 alternations) in ways that neither alternates with the dative or genitive (e.g. the dative passive and causative in 3).

We can achieve a more principled explanation of patterns of case syncretism if we more explicitly relate the component features of morphological case categories to the syntactic (and semantic) conditions on case-assignment. Such an analysis of the German case system offers crucial improvements over existing ones. Nominative and accusative can easily be syncretic because they differ only in terms of a single feature, which also distinguishes the syntactic contexts in 1 and 2. Forms like *die* are underspecified for this feature. Another feature [+oblique] distinguishes genitive and dative from these two, and underlies both alternations between the two cases with certain prepositions and the possibility of their syncretism in forms like feminine singular *der*. Crucially, the feature that distinguishes genitive and dative from each other is not the same one that marks the accusative off from the nominative. There is no syntactic evidence to support such a connection, nor do we find syncretisms between nominative and genitive that such a feature would predict. Finally, I will show that the phenomenon of default case – the appearance of nominative forms in various extra-syntactic contexts (like in 4) – falls out straightforwardly from my proposals.

- (1) a. Der Jürgen hat **den** Kuchen gegessen.
 the:N J. has the:A cake eaten
 'Jürgen ate the cake.'
- b. **Der** Kuchen ist vom Jürgen gegessen worden.
 The:N cake is by-the:D J. eaten become
 'The cake was eaten by Jürgen.'
- (2) a. **Der** Klaus schreibt den Aufsatz.
 the:N K. writes the article
 'Klaus is writing the article.'
- b. Ich lasse **den** Klaus den Aufsatz schreiben.
 I:N let the:A K. the article write
 'I'm having/letting Klaus write the article.'
- (3) a. Ich habe **dem** Jürgen geholfen.
 I have the:D J. helped
 'I helped Jürgen.'
- b. **Dem/*Der** Jürgen ist viel geholfen worden.
 The:D/*The:N J. is much helped become
 'Jürgen has been helped a lot.'
- c. Ich lasse **dem/*den** Jürgen viel geholfen werden.
 I let the:D/*the:A much helped become
 'I let/have Jürgen get helped a lot.'
- (4) a. Den/?Der Hans, den mag ich nicht.
 the:A/N Hans, him:A like I not
 'Hans, I don't like him.'
- b. Der/*Dem Hans, mit dem spreche ich nicht mehr.
 the:N/*D Hans with him:D speak I not more
 'Hans, I don't speak with him anymore.' (German)

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