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ABSTRACT

Case marking has long resisted rationalization in terms of language-external systems of cognition, representing a classical illustration in the generative tradition for an apparently purely 'formal' or 'syntactic' aspect of grammatical organization. I argue that this impasse derives from the prevailing absence of a notion of grammatical meaning, i.e. meaning unavailable lexically or in non-linguistic cognition and uniquely dependent on grammatical forms of organization. In particular, propositional forms of reference, contrary to their widespread designation as 'semantic', are arguably not only grammar-dependent but depend on relations designated as structural 'Cases'. I further argue that these fail to reduce to thematic structure, Person, Tense, or Agreement. Therefore, Case receives a rationalization in terms of how lexical memory is made referential and propositional in language. Structural Case is 'uninterpretable' (bereft of content) only if a non-grammatical notion of meaning is employed, and *sapiens*-specific cognition is (implausibly) regarded as unmediated by language.

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1. The mystery of Case

Obligatory marking for the so-called 'structural' Cases, Nominative (NOM) and Accusative (ACC), has posed significant challenges in terms of its rationalization in language-independent terms. Looking at the history of Case theory in the Government & Binding (GB) era of Universal Grammar in the modern sense (see Lasnik, 2008, for a review), it appears as if thematic roles were as close as we could get to rationalizing Case in terms of independently given 'semantic' notions.¹ When thematic roles, which clearly help to rationalize non-structural Case ('inherent' and 'lexical' Case: cf. Woolford, 2006; Legate, 2008, 2012) give out, structural Case seems to transpire as an apparently meaningless – purely 'syntactic' – aspect of grammatical organization, reflecting a formal licensing constraint on nominal arguments with no deeper rationale. This prevailing uncertainty over the nature of structural Case reflects our deeper and equally prevailing uncertainty over the independent rationale of grammar itself, insofar as the latter goes beyond what seems minimally required to make a system based on lexical meaning semantically compositional. It is clear that grammar needs to be *combinatorial* – but why should it have *Case*?

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¹ On the other hand, Bowers (2010) rightly stresses that even thematic roles, strictly speaking, are not purely 'semantic' in a non-linguistic sense and instead belong to the realm of 'grammatical' semantics already: they are not determined by the lexical content of feature specifications of particular arguments. It is just not the kind of grammatical semantics relevant to marking for structural Case, as I will argue here.

To illustrate, it seems to make no difference to the content or reference of the pronoun in (1) that it is obligatorily marked overtly for ACC, a marking that goes missing morphologically when the pronoun is replaced by a full nominal (2a,b), and that changes to NOM when the embedded clause is finite (2c) or the matrix clause is passivized (2d), without any other proposition being expressed:

- (1) a. John liked **him**/***he**
 b. John believed **him**/***he** to be right
- (2) a. John likes **Bill**
 b. John believes **Bill** to be right
 c. John believes **he**/***him** is right
 d. **He**/***Him** was believed (by John) to be right

GB-Case Theory (Chomsky, 1981) partially abstracts from morphological variation in Case marking, taking *Bill* to be obligatorily marked for ‘abstract’ ACC in (2a,b). But this does not make such marking more interpretable. A second example, from Uriagereka (2008:107), involves obligatory control of an embedded implicit (‘PRO’) subject: (3a) and (3b) seem semantically identical in English, assuming that ‘that’ replaces ‘to lose weight’. Yet, when we inspect their respective translations into Basque, we see very different patterns of Case assignment in the two cases:

- (3) a. I tried [PRO to lose weight]
 b. I tried that.
- (4) a. Ni [PRO pisua galtzen] saiatu naiz
 I.ABS weight-ABS lose-nominalizer-LOC try-PART I.be
 ‘I have tried to lose weight’
 b. Nik hori saiatu dut
 I.ERG that-ABS try-PART I.have.III
 ‘I have tried that’

(4b) exhibits regular transitive Case typology. The transitive *saiatu* (‘try’) goes with the transitive auxiliary *dut*, which codes Agreement with both the ergative (ERG) subject *nik* and the absolutive (ABS) object, *hori* (‘that’). Where the syntactic argument of *try* is the clause, however, as in (4a), the auxiliary is *naiz*, which is unaccusative like English *be*, assigning no ACC. It now only agrees with the absolutive subject, *ni*. In short, the regular Case/Agreement system is not activated in (4a), and the embedded clause is treated as a domain invisible to Case-assignment. Again, no change of content seems to be involved.

The uninterpretability of (structural) Case is a wide consensus in generative grammar today. Svenonius (2007:20) states that ‘attempts to [...] reduce structural cases to semantically-based feature systems [...] go back hundreds of years and have invariably failed’. Pesetsky and Torrego (2011:52) confirm that principles of Case assignment ‘look quite specific to syntax and morphology, with little apparent connection to external cognitive systems’. As Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2008:9) put the same point, there is no obvious ‘interface pressure’ for the existence of structural Case. Chomsky (2000a:127) points out that ‘[s]omething like θ -theory [governing the assignment of thematic roles to arguments] is a property of any language-like system, whereas [Case] checking theory is specific to human language...’. In current mainstream Minimalism, the rationale of Case remains at best indirect, as we review in the next section. It is thus no surprise to find that in the philosophy of language, Case has never figured even as a topic: the lack of its philosophical significance is taken for granted. Against this consensus I will argue here:

- (A) Reference is uniquely grammatical;
 (B) Case licenses referential arguments and hence it is a grammatically meaningful category;
 (C) Nothing else (either in non-grammatical cognition or in grammar itself) does that.

The state of the art in GB/Minimalism, which is my point of departure here, is summarized in Section 2.² In Section 3, I suggest a principled distinction between the *lexico-conceptual* organization of meaning and its *referential* use. In any such use, lexical concepts, retrieved from semantic memory, enter units of grammatical organization, which I identify here as the three ‘phases’ of a derivation of recent Minimalist theory (Chomsky, 2001, 2008): in essence, a nominal, verbal and clausal phase. With each of these correlate distinct possibilities of reference, none of which appear available non-linguistically or lexically. Grammar, however, is not commonly regarded as governing the forms of reference, which is instead taken to be a *semantic* notion. In Section 4, therefore, I articulate and defend a conceptual shift with regard to the cognitive role of grammar in normal cognition. A standard view maintains that language is merely a conventional way of *expressing* thought or meaning, rather than a way of actually *organizing* or *structuring* (a particular mode of) thought. In Frege’s classical case, a ‘proposition’ does not even depend for its existence or structure on the existence of minds (or language). In Fodor’s (2001) framework, the true locus of semantics is said to be ‘thought’, not ‘language’. In formal semantics, a proposition is standardly modeled a

² See e.g. de Hoop and Malchukov (2008) for an alternative approach based on Optimality Theory, which is not discussed here for reasons of space.

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