

Case Licensing and Case Locality

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This paper focuses on questions related to how Cases are licensed. The first part deals with the licensing of non-structural Case, while the second part examines the kinds of locality conditions that can interfere with structural Case licensing cross-linguistically.

It will be argued that the standard idea that non-structural Case is licensed at a level prior to that where structural Case is licensed should be maintained, although we now replace the old D-structure level with an Argument Structure level or the vP phase. Faithfulness to this level is why more marked Cases such as ergative or dative can take priority over less marked Cases such as nominative or accusative. As before, the non-structural Cases are licensed in connection with theta role licensing, but it turns out there are actually two kinds of non-structural Case, lexical and inherent, whose licensing conditions are rather different. Lexical Case is irregular and unpredictable, lexically selected by particular lexical heads. Inherent Case is more regular and predictable, inherently connected with particular thematic (proto-)roles. Two striking new generalizations govern the distribution of these two kinds of non-structural Cases, and taken together, they express the fact that lexical and inherent Case are in complementary distribution with respect to the thematic (proto-)roles with which they can be associated:

(1) Lexical Case can only surface on Themes, never on Agent or direct argument Goals.

Inherent Case can only surface on Agents or direct argument Goals, never on Themes.

Despite this difference, both types of non-structural Case are treated uniformly by syntax. The fact that syntax is blind to how a particular dative Case was licensed is what we expect if the licensing of non-structural Case takes place at a distinct level.

Turning now to structural Case licensing, it is known that structural Case can be licensed under c-command, subject to locality conditions (Chomsky 2000). This paper will discuss new data relevant to how these Case locality conditions are to be formulated, and how Case locality conditions differ cross-linguistically. Contrary to the predictions of the original formulation of Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 1990), a closer V never blocks Infl from licensing nominative Case into the VP. What can block Case licensing is the presence of another DP, as in Chomsky (2000), but languages differ as to which DPs count as blockers. Moreover, it turns out that a DP can be a blocker without actually intervening, or even being closer: what matters is only whether or not there is a foreign DP inside the relevant Case Licensing Domain. This domain approach to Case locality, combined with an OT approach where Case faithfulness is captured with both Dep and Max constraints, formulated following de Lacy (2002), yields an unexpected, but very welcome result: it predicts the fact that some languages use ergative Case only in transitive contexts. It turns out that the use of ergative Case can eliminate or reduce the severity of Case locality violations involving nominative licensing which do not arise in intransitive contexts.