

Comparing morphology across space and time. The case of case

(Barbara Sonnenhauser, University of Zurich)

Comparing morphology across languages is a crucial component in – at least – the following domains of linguistic description:

- meta-level generalisations, such as conceptions of linguistic entities, e.g. word or paradigm
- empirical questions, such as assessing diachronic developments and areal patterns
- corpus tools, such as developing appropriate tag sets for non- and pre-standardised data

At the same time, morphological comparison is highly problematic. Using the example of case, the paper addresses three main challenges from a diatopic and diachronic perspective.

First, the specific value of a morphological marker depends on the overall system of formal distinctions within the category in question. As a consequence, it is hardly possible to compare the Slovene accusative case, (1), with case in an alleged caseless language as Bulgarian, (2).

(1) *Harej je brala neko knjigo* (Sln)
H. be.PRS.3SG read.PTCP.F.SG some.F.SG.ACC book.F.SG.ACC
'Harey was reading a book' (parasolcorpus.org, corpus lemsolaris)

(2) *Xarej četeše njakakva kniga* (Bg)
X. read.PST.3SG some.F.SG book.F.SG
'Harey was reading a book' (parasolcorpus.org, corpus lemsolaris)

Second, the structural properties of functionally equivalent markers may diverge substantially, as illustrated in (3)–(5) for the expression of the recipient-argument: It is marked by nominal affixal marking postposed to the right of the stem, spreading within the NP in Russian, by an element attaching to the left of the phrase in Macedonian, by a combination of both in Torlak. The latter resembles data from older stages of Balkan Slavic, as in (6), which are transitional between OCS, see (7), and the modern standard languages.

(3) *on dal interv'ju neskol'kim telekanalam* (Ru)
M.3SG give.PST interview.N.SG.ACC several.PL.DAT channel.PL.DAT
'he have an interview to several TV channels' (RNC)

(4) *mu ja dadov knjigata na studentot* (Mac)
DAT.M.3SG ACC.F.3SG give.PST.1SG book.F.SG.DEF DEP student.M.SG.DEF
'I gave the book to the student.' (Tomić 2012, 81)

(5) *dadem si na unuku* (Torlak)
give.1SG.PRES REFL.DAT.CL to/DEP granddaughter.F.SG.ACC
'I give to my grand-daughter' (Vuković & Samardžić 2018)

(6) *toj go davaše skrištom na syromasi* (Balkan Slav., 17th c.)
NOM.3SG ACC.M.SG give.IMPF.3SG secretly to/DEP poor.M.PL
'he secretly gave it to the poor' (Tixonravovski damaskin)

(7) *dati razumъ [...] ljudemъ* (OCS)
give.INF reason.M.SG.ACC [...] people.M.PL.DAT
'to give reason to the people' (Luke 1.77, Codex Marianus; TOROT)

Third, categories themselves are hardly comparable cross-linguistically. For case, the conflation of formal and functional distinctions and the mapping of morphology and syntax have long been recognized as being troublesome for language specific and cross-linguistic purposes (Comrie 1986). Nonetheless, the formal inventory and the functional range of case markers are still applied in synchronic and diachronic comparison (e.g. amount of syncretisms) and coarse typological generalizations (e.g. synthetic vs. analytic), visible, e.g., in assumptions of ‘case loss’ for some Slavic languages (but see Topolińska 1986; Widmer & Sonnenhauser 2020).

In addressing these problems, the paper proposes a multi-variate approach (Bickel 2011). Starting from the specification of the relations nominals bear to their heads as central function of case (Blake 2001), it becomes possible to identify all morphological means that serve this function, split them into variables permitting specific feature specifications and extract marking patterns that can be compared cross-linguistically. Applying this procedure to the expression of microroles of predicates with identical meaning (Hartmann, Haspelmath & Cysouw 2014) allows for insight into the areal distribution and diachronic development of such marking patterns – and hence for comparing case by doing away with case.

References

- Bickel, Balthasar. 2011. Grammatical relations typology. Song, Jae Jung (ed.). *The Oxford handbook of linguistic typology*. Oxford, 399–444.
- Blake, Barry J. (2001). *Case*. 2nd ed. Cambridge.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1986. On delimiting cases. Brecht, Richard D. & James S. Levine (eds.). *Case in Slavic*. Bloomington, 86–106.
- Hartmann, Iren, Martin Haspelmath & Michael Cysouw. 2014. Identifying semantic role clusters and alignment types via microrole coexpression tendencies. *Studies in Language* 38.3, 463–484.
- Parasol: *Parallel corpus of Slavic and other languages* (parasolcorpus.org).
- RNC: *Russian National Corpus* (ruscorpora.ru).
- Tomić, Olga. 2012. *A grammar of Macedonian*. Bloomington.
- Topolińska, Zuzanna. 1986. Grammatical functions of noun phrases in Balkan Slavic languages and the so-called category of case. Brecht, Richard D. & James S. Levine (eds.). *Case in Slavic*. Bloomington, 280–295.
- TOROT: *Tromsø Old Russian and OCS Treebank* (<http://foni.uio.no:3000>).
- Vuković, Teodora & Tanja Samardžić. 2018. Prostorna raspodela frekvencije post-pozitivnog člana u timočkom govoru. Ćirković, Svetlana et al. (eds.). *Timok. Folkloristička i lingvistička terenska istraživanja 2015–2017*. Knjaževac, Beograd.
- Widmer, Paul & Barbara Sonnenhauser. 2020. Indeed, nothing lost in the Balkans. Assessing morphosyntactic convergence in an areal context. *Balkanistica* 33. Forthcoming.