

Morphological and Abstract Case

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This article examines the relationship between abstract and morphological case, arguing that morphological case realizes abstract Case features in a postsyntactic morphology, according to the Elsewhere Condition. A class of *prima facie* ergative-absolutive languages is identified wherein intransitive subjects receive abstract nominative Case and transitive objects receive abstract accusative Case; these are realized through a morphological default, which is often mislabeled as absolutive. Further support comes from split ergativity based on a nominal hierarchy, which is shown to have a morphological source. Proposals that case and agreement are purely morphological phenomena are critiqued.

Keywords: ergativity, Warlpiri, Niuean, Enga, Hindi, Pama-Nyungan, Icelandic, inherent Case, quirky Case, morphological case, abstract Case

1 Introduction

This article explores the relationship between abstract Case and morphological case. I argue that abstract Case features are determined syntactically and realized in a postsyntactic morphological component. This morphological realization of abstract Case features is governed by the Elsewhere Condition (Anderson 1969, Kiparsky 1973, Halle and Marantz 1993, Halle 1997), resulting in an imperfect relationship between syntax and morphology, but one that is as faithful as possible given the morphological resources of the language. The data used in the argumentation come primarily from ergative languages.

I identify a class of *prima facie* ergative-absolutive languages in which absolutive—that is, a case that groups together intransitive subjects and transitive objects—does not exist, either as an abstract Case or as a morphological case. Instead, the “absolutive” is the default morphological realization of abstract Case features, used when no realization of the specific Case feature is available. This morphological default is inserted for both nominative Case on the intransitive subject and accusative Case on the transitive object. The situation is thus entirely parallel to that

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Glosses in some examples have been regularized for clarity. In Pama-Nyungan language examples, *rC* indicates a retroflex consonant, *Ch* indicates a dental consonant, *Cy* indicates a palatal consonant, and *ng* is the velar nasal. In Indo-Aryan language examples, capitalization indicates a retroflex sound, and repetition of vowels indicates length.