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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

CASE

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PART I THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO CASE

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This chapter focuses on the main aspects of the reduction/loss of case and the decay of case marking systems. The general mechanisms which lead to the merger of case and case syncretism and, eventually, to the loss of (some) cases include: (i) phonetic processes which result in the loss of the difference between two or more case forms, i.e. erosion of case inflection, and, thus, in case syncretism; (ii) overlapping of syntactic and semantic functions and/or uses of individual cases, i.e. syntactic and semantic affinity of some cases; (iii) semantic or functional overlapping of whole argument structures; and (iv) a variety of analogical developments and paradigmatic levelling (cf. Kulikov 2006).

Often these mechanisms work together so that several factors create favourable (albeit not always sufficient) conditions for the case mergers. The phenomenon of case syncretism can be best illustrated with examples from the history of the Indo-European languages which attest nearly all possible types of case mergers within the original eight-case Proto-Indo-European case system: genitive-ablative (Slavic, Greek), nominative-accusative (Balkan: Romanian, Albanian), dative-locative (Greek), ablative-instrumental-locative (Latin), dative-ablative-instrumental-locative (Celtic, Germanic), etc. (cf. Luraghi 1987 and Chapter 14).

The evolution of the Arabic nominal inflection provides an instructive example. In the post-classical period, Arabic undergoes a strong reduction of case endings, resulting in the loss of the original three-case system. Phonologically, these processes essentially amount to the weakening, merger, and the subsequent loss of final vowels (in particular, Nom.Sg. -u, Gen.Sg. -i and Acc.Sg. -a). Middle Arabic of the Southern Palestinian Christian texts of the eighth–tenth centuries AD still exhibits vestiges of case distinctions, although the oppositions of the classical language appear severely deteriorated. One case variation found in this period is that between the genitive, accusative, and nominative on nominal forms preceded by prepositions (where case endings were preserved longer than in many other contexts), as illustrated in (1):

(1) Southern Palestinian Christian Middle Arabic (Gruber-Miller 1990: 244f)
   a. w-l-7b-ii-h
      and-to-father-GEN-his
      ‘... and to his father’
   b. nS 7b-aa-hman
      with father-ACC-their
      ‘... with their father’
   c. y-tklm Ylu 7x-uu-h
      3MASC.SG.IMPF-speak against brother-NOM-his
      ‘He speaks against his brother ...’

Another example of the total collapse of a case system, primarily due to phonetic developments in word-final position and erosion of case endings, can be seen in the history of the Proto-Romance (i.e. Latin) case system in the daughter languages. Latin attests the very beginning of the decay of the original Proto-Indo-European
case system (see Section 30.2 below), which has affected all Romance languages. The
daughter languages, i.e. Spanish, Italian, French, Romanian, etc., display the same
tendency, reducing the Latin case system further, ending up with caseless systems
or with two cases at maximum as in Romanian (Penny 2002; Calabrese 1998; Blake
2001: 175f.; Hewson and Bubenik 2006: ch. 11). This can be shown with an example
from Spanish where the relevant phonological changes are the following:

(i) Loss of final -m mostly causing Acc.sg. to merge with the Abl.sg.:

```
-m > -a:

Acc.sg. montem

Abl.sg. monte
```

(ii) The merger of the long and short a, together with the loss of final -m, caused the merger of Nom., Acc. and Abl.sg.

```
-m > -a, a > a:

Nom.sg. mensa

Acc.sg. mensam

Abl.sg. mensa
```

(iii) The merger of u(m) and ù in final position caused the merger of Acc.sg. and Abl.sg.:

```
-u(m), ù > -ù:

Acc.sg. dominum

Abl.sg. dominum
```

(iv) The merger of the front vowels in final position caused the merger of Nom.-
Acc.pl. (montes) with Gen.sg. (montis).

By the fourth-fifth centuries AD these changes had resulted in a considerable re­
duction of the case paradigm: a three-case system in the Eastern part of the Roman
empire and two cases in most of the West, including Spain. The latter entails that
the three oblique cases had merged into one common form, hence the system
consisted of only nominative and accusative (oblique) case, as illustrated by the
three examples in Table 30.1 (Penny 2002: 114-19).

Such two-case systems survived in French (see below) and Provençal until the
twelfth-thirteenth centuries (cf. Chapter 47, this volume, for a typological analysis
of two-case systems). In other areas, there was a further reduction to invariable
singular and plural forms. By virtue of additional phonetic changes most of the
contrasts shown in Table 30.1 have become obliterated, surviving only for anni ~ annos. Of course, this isolated subtype could not survive for a long time, foremost due to the levelling pressure of the morphological paradigm. Accord­
ingly, the form annos has been generalized as a plural form, in analogy with plural -s from other words in the nominal paradigm. The resulting system of the three major paradigmatic classes that Spanish inherits from Latin is represented in Table 30.2.

### 30.2 Functional mergers

An example of erosion of case inflection supported by functional mergers is pro­
vided by the syncretism of three Proto-Indo-European cases, ablative, locative, and
instrumental, into the Latin ablative (for details of the history of the Latin case
inflection, see, in particular, Leumann et al. 1977: 405ff). The relevant fragment
of the system of case endings reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European (including
the endings traditionally regarded as borrowed from the pronominal paradigm) is
represented in Table 30.3. The endings which have left direct reflexes in the actually
attested markers of ablative are in bold face while those which have only indirectly
contributed to the attested endings are bold and underlined.

The resulting system of ablative endings, arranged by declension types, is
shown in Table 30.4. Although the origins of some actually attested end­
ings may be the subject of debate, the main details of the scenario are quite
clear. This example from Latin is useful as it shows that phonetic processes may render formal distinctions between cases opaque, thus leading to the merger of some forms (as in the case of Loc. and Ins.pl.), although they do not represent the only driving force of case syncretism. All three source cases have left their traces in both the singular and plural paradigms at least in some of the attested Latin declensions, so phonetic processes alone could not yet result in the simple syncretism of these three cases. Hence, the final outcome is a result of a complex interplay of several mechanisms; in particular, the three source cases must be considered semantically (functionally) close enough to each other, which in turn has licensed the form of one of them to take over the functions of the other(s).

The genesis of the Abl.pl. ending of the third, fourth, and fifth declensions -bus poses some problems. It is likely to represent the Proto-Indo-Celtic *-bus, which replaced the original ending *-ios, presumably under the influence of the instrumental ending *-abh(see Kortlandt 2003: 50).
a few (minor) inflectional types which had completely lost their case distinctions by
the Old French period; (iii) the very intricate distribution of as few as two markers,
-er and -e, across the four-member paradigm, which may have rendered the system
as ‘conceptually too complicated’ (van Reenen and Schosler 2000: 337).

30.4 SYNONYMOUS ARGUMENT STRUCTURE
CONSTRUCTIONS

It is a well-known fact that languages have a tendency to abate synonymous gram­
matical forms over time. For case and argument structure, this can take place in two
ways: (i) the morphological case distinctions disappear with a consequent merging
of the argument structure constructions; (ii) productive case and argument struc­
ture constructions attract new verbs and verbs from non-productive constructions,
thereby gradually causing non-productive constructions to fall into disuse. Given
a definition of productivity based on type frequency, semantic coherence, and
an inverse correlation between the two, the productivity of case and argument
structure constructions is, at least in part, derived from the size/type frequency of
each case and argument structure construction (cf. Barodal forthcoming, a). Hence,
the case and argument structure construction lowest in type frequency is expected
to disappear first, then the one next lowest in type frequency, etc., until only the
productive case and argument structure constructions are left in the language. This
development correlates in part with changes in the verbal vocabulary, as productive
argument structures attract new verbs while non-productive argument structures
do not. Hence, contact situations with massive replacement of the vocabulary can
speed up this development. In Germanic both developmental paths outlined above
are documented. In Mainland Scandinavian and English the development has led
to case merging and case loss, whereas in German and Icelandic the development
has led to the disuse and disappearance of the argument structures lowest in type
frequency.

Table 30.7 shows case and argument structures which can be postulated for two­
place predicates in Germanic on the basis of comparative evidence and documented
case marking in the history of Icelandic (Barodal forthcoming, b).

The case and argument structure construction highest in type frequency in all
the Germanic languages was without a doubt the nominative subject construction,
while the dative subject predicates were low in type frequency and accusative subject
predicates were even less common. A comparative study of the semantics of ac­
cusative and dative subject predicates across the Germanic languages reveals that
they are grossly speaking either (i) stative/inchoative experience-based predicates,
or (ii) anti-causative intransitives (Barodal 2004). There was, thus, a considerable
overlap in the semantics of accusative and dative subject predicates in Germanic,
also found for the nominative subject construction, which was the semantically
most open construction of them all. A comparison of Nom–Acc, Nom–Dat, and
Nom–Gen in Modern Icelandic also reveals that Nom–Dat and Nom–Gen are not
strictly confined to any particular semantic fields, but can be regarded semantically
as proper subsets of the Nom–Acc argument structure construction (cf. Barodal
forthcoming, c). This comparative evidence suggests that the case and argument
structure constructions in Germanic were partly synonymous.

The genitive subject construction, which was lowest in type frequency of all
the subject constructions, is not documented in Old English and Old Swedish.
It thus seems that it already disappeared in these languages before recorded
history. The first documented construction to disappear in Old Swedish is the
genitive object construction, i.e. the construction lowest in type frequency of all
the object constructions. This took place before 1350 (cf. Delsing 1991). In English,
on the other hand, genitive objects disappeared in two rounds: the genitive objects
of Acc–Gen and Dat–Gen disappeared during the twelfth century while genitive
objects of Nom–Gen did not disappear until the thirteenth century (Allen 1995:
217–19). This is in accordance with differences in the size of these constructions,
as Acc–Gen and Dat–Gen were much lower in type frequency than the Nom–
Gen construction. The distinction between accusative and dative on nouns, both
subjects and objects, was lost in English during the thirteenth century, after the loss
of the genitive. Finally, the oblique subject construction (formerly accusative and
dative subject construction) starts losing ground during the fifteenth century and
only exists in fixed expressions after that (Allen 1995: ch. 6). In Swedish, moreover,
the accusative subject construction (which was lower in type frequency than the
dative subject construction) was lost around 1400 (Falk, C. 1997: 14–15) and c.1450
the case distinctions on nouns had completely disappeared. The oblique subject
construction (visible on pronouns) survived in Swedish until the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries.

In German the genitive subject construction started disappearing during the
has been heavily reduced in the history of German, with only a few predicates left, and so has the dative object construction, although the dative object construction is still higher in type frequency than the genitive object construction, with perhaps around 100 predicates in total (cf. Maling 2002). The accusative and the dative subject constructions have also been heavily reduced in German, with approximately 80-100 predicates left (cf. Barðdal 2004). In the history of German, moreover, accusative and dative subject predicates have been interchangeable, with dative subject predicates attracting more verbs from the accusative subject construction than the accusative subject construction from the dative one. In summary, the construction lowest in type frequency, i.e. the genitive subject construction, has disappeared, the remaining low type-frequency constructions, i.e. genitive and dative objects, and the accusative and dative subject constructions, have gone down in type frequency. This is because the predicates instantiating the low type-frequency constructions have either disappeared in German or occur now in the Nom(-Acc) construction.

Finally, in Icelandic, only one construction has completely disappeared, namely the Dat-Gen construction, which was instantiated by only a few predicates in Old Norse-Icelandic (cf. Barðdal 2001:197-8). Three other low type-frequency constructions are at the border of becoming extinct today, namely the Acc-Nom, Acc-Gen, and Gen-Nom constructions. These were slightly higher in type frequency in Old Norse-Icelandic than the Dat-Gen construction, and are now lowest in type frequency of all the case constructions in Modern Icelandic. The Nom-Gen construction has also been reduced in the history of Icelandic. Nom-Dat predicates in Modern Icelandic are approximately 750 (Maling 2002:31), accusative subject predicates are c. 200, and dative subject predicates are around 700 (Barðdal 2004). Hence, only the case and argument structure constructions lowest in type frequency in Old Norse-Icelandic have disappeared, and the ones that were already low then have decreased in type frequency. The constructions of intermediate size have maintained their status (like Nom-Dat), and the most productive Nom-Acc construction has increased its type frequency (cf. Barðdal forthcoming, b).

The loss of case and the time/onset of these changes correlate with the degree of language contact found in the individual Germanic language communities during medieval times. England was exposed to the most language contact, beginning in the thirteenth century. Germany has had considerably less contact and more spread out in time, while Iceland, being the most isolated of the four, has been in the least contact of them all. Clearly, rapid changes in the vocabulary favour the most productive case and argument structure constructions and disfavour the non-productive ones, causing them to fall into disuse earlier.

Cases are of course not evenly distributed worldwide. It is generally known, for example, that cases are common in Eurasia and much less common in Africa. Modern typological research aims at capturing and understanding such continent-wide frequency differences (Nichols 1992; Bickel 2007b), and it has become standard practice in universals research to control for confounding factors from continent-wide linguistic areas (Dryer 1989; Cysouw 2005). A fundamental problem of linguistic geography, however, is that it is all too easy for the human eye to detect spatial patterns on a map even when they are artefacts of chance or when they arise simply because some regions have many more different people and languages than others (cf. Siberia with Cameroon; e.g. Nettle 1999).

Our approach to linguistic geography starts from biogeographical and culture-historical theories of population movements and contact patterns that define a constant set of areas as predictor variables for statistical modelling (Predictive Areality Theory: Bickel and Nichols 2006). Thus, areas are not defined linguistically, and this avoids circularity when used in linguistic surveys. Hence the present chapter does not fish for areas by visual inspection of maps, but assumes areas as hypotheses...