

## 50. Asymmetrical Case-Marking

Oliver A. Iggesen

### 1. Defining the values

Morphological case inflection is an efficient strategy for encoding syntactic relationships. Therefore one might naively expect that case-marking languages should use it consistently, applying the same case categories to all nominal expressions occurring in the appropriate syntactic positions. Indeed, there are many case-marking languages of this kind. Such languages exhibiting identical sets of case categories for all nominals are called **case-symmetrical**. Other languages, however, apply case marking more selectively across their lexicon, restricting the occurrence of certain (or all) cases to a subset of their nominals. The different subsets of nominals therefore display different case inventories. This typological property of languages is called **case-asymmetry**, and the languages themselves, **case-asymmetrical**. This map shows the distribution of case-asymmetry vs. case-symmetry on the basis of 261 languages (the same sample as in chapter 49), with case-asymmetrical languages being further divided into distinct subtypes.

@	1.	No morphological case-marking	81
@	2.	Symmetrical case-marking	79
@	3.	Additive-quantitatively asymmetrical case-marking	53
@	4.	Subtractive-quantitatively asymmetrical case-marking	20
@	5.	Qualitatively asymmetrical case-marking	7
@	6.	Syncretism in relevant NP-types	21
total			261

The phenomenon of case-asymmetry is based on the division of a language's nominals into subclasses sharing common semantic or functional characteristics (i.e., into non-morphologically based natural classes); these subclasses are called **NP-types**. Case-asymmetry manifests itself as differences between the case inventories of different NP-types (generally in the form of a deviation from a language's prevalent paradigm pattern found only in some minoritarian NP-type). The NP-type most frequently affected by asymmetrical case-marking is the personal pronoun, but other pronoun types, as well as semantically defined subclasses of full nouns (e.g. nouns referring to humans, or personal names), have also been identified as capable of showing deviant case inventories. Classes of nominals based purely on morphological criteria, such as declension classes lacking a common semantic basis or entirely irregular isolated word-paradigms, do not constitute NP-types, and hence do not manifest asymmetrical case-marking.

A typical example of a **case-symmetrical** language is Turkish. All nominals inflect for the same case categories.

(1) Turkish (Kornfilt 1997: 212, 214, 281)

	'book' (SG)	1SG personal pronoun
Nominative	<i>kitap</i>	<i>ben</i>
Accusative	<i>kitab-ı</i>	<i>ben-i</i>
Genitive	<i>kitab-ın</i>	<i>ben-im</i>
Dative	<i>kitab-a</i>	<i>ben-a</i>
Locative	<i>kitab-ta</i>	<i>ben-de</i>
Ablative	<i>kitab-tan</i>	<i>ben-den</i>
Instrumental	<i>kitab-la</i>	<i>ben-im-le</i>

A language is **additive-quantitatively case-asymmetrical** when a particular minority NP-type inflects for more categories than the general noun paradigm. The most straightforward

example is English, with its objective case represented only in the (majority of the) personal pronouns and in the interrogative–relative pronoun *who*, but lacking from the other nominals.

(2)

	‘house’ (SG)	1SG personal pronoun
direct		<i>I</i>
objective	<i>house</i>	<i>me</i>
genitive	<i>house’s</i>	<i>my</i>

Case–marking on full nouns in English is limited to the “Saxon” genitive (clitic case–marking, see chapter 49). An additive–quantitatively asymmetrical language without any case on full nouns is Kobon (Trans–New Guinea; Papua New Guinea).

(3) Kobon (Davies 1981: 154)

	‘peanut’	1SG personal pronoun
direct		<i>yad</i>
objective	<i>gaisam</i>	<i>ip</i>

Kobon also serves to explain the numerical difference between the languages exhibiting the feature value ‘no morphological case’ in the present chapter and chapter 49: languages like Kobon qualify as case–less in chapter 49, since they lack **generally applicable** case, but count as an instance of feature value 3 in the present chapter because they do have **pronominal** case.

Case–asymmetry is equally possible in languages with rich case inventories. An example in point is Kolyma Yukaghir (eastern Siberia), which has nine distinct cases on full nouns, among them an accusative marked by *–ge/le*. The 1/2SG/PL personal pronouns, however, have, in addition to the regular accusative, a so–called pronominal accusative in *–u/*, which is used when the subject is 1/2SG/PL (full nouns take the

nominative under these conditions; Maslova 2003: 4, 94, 234). Finally, additive–quantitative asymmetry may also obtain when two or more distinct case functions sharing one formal expression in the general case inventory have separate expressions in a particular NP-type. This is the situation in Araona (Tacanan; Bolivia), which has a marker *-a* ~ *-ja* covering both ergative and genitive functions on full nouns, but distinct case forms for these functions in several personal pronouns (e.g. 1sg ergative *yama*, genitive *quima*; Pitman 1980: 14, 75, 82).

**Subtractive–quantitative asymmetrical case–marking** is the converse of additive–quantitative asymmetry, i.e., a particular NP-type shows fewer categories than the general nominal case inventory. This is exemplified by Chittagong Bengali, which has a distinct ergative for past–tense transitive agents with full nouns but not with pronouns (animate transitive patients apparently take the objective case in all tenses).

(4) Bengali (Učida 1970: 31, 38) (partial paradigm)

	‘sister’ (sg)	2sg personal pronoun
nominative	<i>bòin</i>	
ergative	<i>bòinje</i>	<i>tui</i>
objective	<i>bòinjərə</i>	<i>torè</i>

Several languages are classified as subtractive–quantitatively asymmetrical only under the stipulation that possessive–marking and other adnominal word–forms which, in addition to their relational function, encode gender/number agreement with their head nouns not be considered case (but rather adjectives). In Fur (Nilo–Saharan; Sudan), for instance, there is a non–agreeing genitive morpheme *-ij* on full nouns which is a true case marker, while personal pronouns in possessor function are adjectives because they agree in number with the possessum: 1sg *duij* (singular possessum), *kuij* (plural possessum) (Jakobi 1990: 97–98, 122–123). Despite the fact

that Fur pronouns have some kind of morphological equivalent to the genitive case found with nouns, this language is for formal reasons counted as an instance of subtractive-quantitative asymmetry.

Yimas (Lower Sepik–Ramu; Papua New Guinea) shows subtractive-quantitative asymmetry with respect to toponyms referring to topographic features (i.e. not to settlements). This language has a general oblique case suffix *-n ~ -nan*, which marks various peripheral functions, among them the locative. However, names of topographic features do not take this suffix when occurring in locative function, but remain zero-marked instead (Foley 1991: 165, 170–171). The Yimas example shows that case-asymmetry is by no means restricted to pronouns: any semantically coherent class of nominals can constitute a relevant NP-type.

While quantitative asymmetry implies a difference in the number of case categories between the general case system and the asymmetry-affected NP-types, **qualitative asymmetry** obtains when the boundaries between the functional domains of cases are drawn so differently across the NP-types that it is not possible to equate the categories found in the two inflectional systems with each other and to refer to them with the same case labels. Typically, different sets of markers are employed for these categories. In reality, this type is restricted to core-argument alignment splits (splits following the lines of NP-type distinctions). In Pitjantjatjara (Pama–Nyungan; South Australia) full nouns follow ergative-absolutive alignment, while all personal pronouns show nominative-accusative alignment.

(5) Pitjantjatjara (Bowe 1990: 9–19) (partial paradigm)

	'man' (SG)		1SG personal pronoun
Absolutive	<i>wati</i>	Nominative	<i>ngayu-lu</i>
Ergative	<i>wati-ngku</i>	Accusative	<i>ngayu-nya</i>

Purposive/ Genitive	<i>wati-ku</i>	Purposive/ Genitive	<i>ngayu-ku</i>
Locative/ Instrumental	<i>wati-ngka</i>	Locative/ Instrumental	<i>ngayu-la</i>

Case-asymmetry bears superficial resemblance to **case-syncretism**, the merger in formal expression of two or more case categories (see also chapter 28). However, case-syncretism implies that the categories affected by the merger are underlyingly still intact and present in the inflectional paradigm, whereas case-asymmetry entails the total lack of a paradigmatic category, either in the general case system or in the asymmetry-affected NP-type. Syncretic paradigms always have fewer overt case distinctions than the general system, which leads to their easy confusion with subtractive-quantitative asymmetry. In a few instances where both interpretations are feasible, the more plausible one has been adopted here. Case-syncretism may take place in single word-paradigms or (non-semantically defined) declension classes as well as in semantically defined NP-types. Only the latter instances are deemed significant in treating case-asymmetry and are therefore represented on the map by a feature value of their own. A clear instance of such an asymmetry-relevant case syncretism is provided by Latvian, where the 2nd person plural pronoun is affected (a single pronominal person category is considered a relevant NP-type).

(6) Latvian (Mathiassen 1997: 43, 65)

	'father' (SG)	1SG personal pronoun	2PL personal pronoun
Nominative	<i>tēv-s</i>	<i>es</i>	<i>jūs</i>
Accusative	<i>tēv-u</i>	<i>mani</i>	<i>jūs</i>
Genitive	<i>tēv-a</i>	<i>manis</i>	<i>jūsu</i>
Dative	<i>tēv-am</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>jums</i>
Locative	<i>tēv-ā</i>	<i>manī</i>	<i>jūsos</i>

Strictly speaking, case-asymmetry is a local phenomenon, that is, it applies more to specific paradigms than to languages as a whole. But every language has more than just two NP-types with the potential of hosting case-asymmetry, and one and the same NP-type of a language may be affected in multiple ways by asymmetry-related phenomena. It is therefore logical that combinations of different types of asymmetry within the same language can and do occur. Such combinations have been dealt with on the map by prioritizing them according to the following ranking hierarchy:

*qualitative asymmetry* > *additive-quantitative asymmetry* > *subtractive-quantitative asymmetry* > *relevant syncretism*.

This means that if in a language, for instance, additive and subtractive-quantitative asymmetry co-occur, the former phenomenon outranks the latter, and the language is coded on the map as additive-quantitative.

## 2. Theoretical issues

The difference between case-asymmetry and case-syncretism depends crucially on the definition of inflectional paradigm. Case-asymmetry implies the non-existence of certain case categories in some subset of the nominals, while syncretism presupposes the existence of the same categorial distinctions in all NP-types. The case inventory of the general system, i.e. the set of categories defining the nominal morphology of the language ("system-defining structure properties" in the sense of Wurzel 1984), is delimited by the number of distinctive form-meaning pairings that occur in the vast majority of the nominal lexemes. In other words, it is **type-frequency** in the lexicon that makes a particular paradigm-structure system-defining. Additional categories, represented only in type-infrequent NP-

types, are not part of the general system. It is morphologically inadequate to posit, e.g., an underlying objective case for all nominals in English, which would surface only in a handful of pronouns but syncretize with the direct case in all other instances (cf. Haspelmath 2002: 145).

Languages may or may not allow case categories such as locative or instrumental, whose prototypical hosts are inanimate nouns, to apply to animates or humans. For the purposes of this chapter, these categories are treated as **semantically incompatible**. Personal pronouns, which are generally coreferential with human nouns, are then excluded from these cases too, and are thus not counted as case-asymmetrical.

Only **free-form pronouns** are considered valid NP-types susceptible to case-asymmetry, while **clitic pronouns** (and bound pronominals) have been consistently ignored. Clitics are in general closely associated with the verb phrase, and they are reduced in their status as autonomous nominal constituents. They tend to inflect only for core-argument cases, which would lead to a trivial, mechanistic statement of case-asymmetry for practically all languages that have core-constituent clitics and some additional peripheral case in the general system. They also tend to involve too much allomorphy to build neat case paradigms.

### 3. Geographical distribution

The map does not show many clear areal patterns; this was perhaps to be expected, given the abstractness of the property and the impossibility of making more fine-grained distinctions (such as representing whether grammatical, peripheral or adnominal cases are affected by the asymmetry). There is a tendency for asymmetry to be absent in the agglutinative case-marking languages of Eurasia, while significant syncretism is widespread among the more conservative fusional Indo-European languages, and also in the Caucasus. Clusters of



additive-quantitative asymmetry are found in Europe, western North America, New Guinea, northern Australia, and the central belt of sub-Saharan Africa. Other areas where additive-quantitative asymmetry is quite common are northern Asia, the Himalayas and the Amazon. Also most Philippine-type languages show additive-quantitative asymmetry. Subtractive-quantitative asymmetry is found scattered across the map, while qualitative asymmetry is restricted to Australia (among the sample languages; it has also been reported for some Panoan languages, cf. Valenzuela 2000).