

## 28. Case Syncretism

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### 1. Identifying case syncretism

This map shows instances of case syncretism in nominals (nouns, pronouns and adjectives). We identify case syncretism when a single **inflected form** corresponds to two or more **case functions**. The criterion used here for identifying case functions is form-based: a distinct morphosyntactic case is recognised for a language if it is ever correlated with a formal inflectional distinction (Comrie 1991: 44–47). For example, in Krongo, subject and object forms are never distinguished, so this is not construed as an example of case syncretism, but rather as a single nominative–accusative case (see 1). However, the dative case is distinct in nouns but identical to this nominative–accusative form in pronouns, so a dative = nominative–accusative syncretism is recognised for Krongo. The formal criteria for identifying syncretism may also be found within the paradigm of a single word, as in Central Yup'ik, where the absolutive and relative (a case combining the functions of ergative and genitive) are distinct in the singular but not in the plural or dual (see 2).

(1) Krongo (Kadugli; Sudan; Reh 1985: 144–154, 164)

	'I'	'person'
NOM–ACC	<i>àʔàŋ</i>	<i>káaw</i>
DAT	<i>àʔàŋ</i>	<i>àkáaw</i>

(2) Central Yup'ik (Eskimo; Alaska; Jacobson 1995: 469–470)

'land'	PL	DU	SG
ABS	<i>nunat</i>	<i>nunak</i>	<i>nuna</i>
REL	<i>nunat</i>	<i>nunak</i>	<i>nunam</i>

## 2. Defining the values

The map records four values:

@	1. Inflectional case marking is absent or minimal	123
@	2. Inflectional case marking is syncretic for core cases only	18
@	3. Inflectional case marking is syncretic for core and non-core cases	22
@	4. Inflectional case marking is never syncretic	34
	total	197

A language is classed as having minimal case marking if the nominal paradigm contains no more than two forms. In such a language the absence of any case distinction is equivalent to the complete absence of case inflection. Since we construe syncretism as a phenomenon affecting inflected words, such languages are here given the same value as languages with no inflectional case marking; i.e. the conditions for identifying syncretism are not met. The **core cases** referred to by value 2 and value 3 (cf. Blake 1994: 119–144) prototypically represent the functions of subject and object, and are familiar under the names *nominative* (subject), *accusative* (object), *ergative* (subject of a transitive verb) and *absolutive* (subject of an intransitive verb and object of a transitive). Other cases are classed as non-core cases.

**2.1. Syncretism of the core cases.** Value 2 involves the collapse solely of the core cases, i.e. nominative and accusative (see 3) or ergative and absolutive (see 4). Some languages display both patterns, resulting in so-called split ergativity, where one set of nominals appears to decline according to a nominative–

accusative pattern, another according to an ergative-absolutive pattern, as in Wambaya (figure 5). Comparing the distribution of case marking across these two classes, one is able to set up a system of three cases: ergative, nominative-absolutive, and accusative, whereby the nominative-absolutive is syncretic with the ergative for some words and with the accusative for others (see Goddard 1982).

(3) Yurok (Algic; California; Robins 1958: 20–21)

	‘we’	cf. ‘I’
NOM	<i>nekah</i>	<i>nek</i>
ACC	<i>nekah</i>	<i>nekac</i>

(4) Basque (Saltarelli et al. 1988: 211)

	‘you.PL’	cf. ‘we’
ABS	<i>zuek</i>	<i>gu</i>
ERG	<i>zuek</i>	<i>guk</i>

(5) Wambaya (West Barkly; Northern Territory, Australia;  
Nordlinger 1998: 80–84, 126)

	‘grandmother’	‘they’
ERG	<i>gugugayi</i>	<i>irriyani</i>
NOM–ABS	<i>guguga</i>	<i>irriyani</i>
ACC	<i>guguga</i>	<i>irra</i>

**2.2. Syncretism involving the non-core cases.** In the sample, syncretism involving a non-core case presupposes either syncretism involving a core case (§2.1) or the complete absence of core case distinctions (attested in Irish and Krongo), which suggests the following empirical universal: syncretism involving a non-core case implies the lack of core case distinction in some or all nominals.

Some instances involve syncretism of a non-core case with one of the core cases, typically those associated with transitive clauses, namely accusative (figure 6) or ergative (figure 7).

(6) Finnish (Fromm 1982: 89; foldout 1)

	‘lock’	cf. ‘I’
NOM	<i>lukko</i>	<i>minä</i>
ACC	<i>lukon</i>	<i>minut</i>
GEN	<i>lukon</i>	<i>minun</i>

(7) Burushaski (isolate; Pakistan or India; Klimov 1970: 42)

	‘boy’	cf. ‘woman’
ABS	<i>hiles</i>	<i>gus</i>
ERG	<i>hilese</i>	<i>guse</i>
GEN	<i>hilese</i>	<i>gusmo</i>

It is also possible for non-core cases to be syncretic with each other, involving either partial or complete collapse of non-core case distinctions. Partial collapse is well attested in Russian, where a number of different patterns are found, e.g. locative=dative (singular of *a*-stem nouns), locative=genitive (plural of adjectives and pronouns), genitive=locative=dative (singular of *i*-stem nouns), etc. Complete collapse of non-core distinctions is illustrated by Ingush: attributive adjectives distinguish two forms, nominative and oblique, e.g., *joqqa* ‘big.NOM’ vs. *joqqača* ‘big.OBL’, with the oblique corresponding to all seven of the remaining distinct case forms found in nouns (Nichols 1994: 99).

### 3. Geographical and genealogical tendencies

There are 74 languages of the sample which mark case inflectionally, with case syncretism found in 40 of them. It is most regularly found in Eurasia and Australia. The concentration

in Eurasia is due to the presence of Indo-European, Uralic and languages of the Caucasus (Nakh–Daghestanian and Kartvelian); these languages are also responsible for most of the examples involving syncretism among non-core cases (§2.2). Syncretism is especially well-represented in Indo-European, where it is practically ubiquitous. The cluster of languages with case syncretism in Australia is largely, though not solely, due to the split ergativity pattern typical of Pama–Nyungan.

#### 4. Theoretical implications

Linguists have long sought to use case syncretism as a window into the underlying structure of case semantics. If two cases can be expressed by a single form, so the reasoning goes, this must be because they share some element of meaning. A famous early example of this is Jakobson (1984[1936]), where the multiple patterns of case syncretism found in Russian are used to set up a network of intersecting case features; this in turn owes a debt to earlier studies of Indo-European case systems, where case functions tended over time to collapse into an ever smaller number of forms. What the data from this chapter make clear is that only a subset of the phenomena characteristic of Indo-European have parallels elsewhere.

Outside of Indo-European, case syncretism almost exclusively involves a core case. The most common subtype, syncretism of the core cases with each other (§2.1), is often correlated with an animacy hierarchy, with personal pronouns at one end and inanimate nouns at the other. Higher animacy arguments are more likely to have a distinct accusative form, while lower animacy arguments are more likely to have a distinct ergative form. Syncretism of a core case with a non-core case (§2.2) seems to be an allied phenomenon: it looks as if it were a repair strategy to reverse the effects of core case syncretism, with the accusative or ergative “borrowing” the form of an oblique case in order to introduce a distinction between the core

cases that would otherwise be absent from the paradigm. For example, in Eastern Armenian, where nominative and accusative are identical for inanimates, the dative case form is used to create an accusative for animate nouns (Minassian 1980: 90–91); while in Lak, where absolutive and ergative are identical for pronouns, it appears as if the genitive case form in *-u/* is used to create an ergative for nouns (Žirkov 1955: 64).

Syncretism involving solely the non-core cases (§2.2) shows few cross-linguistic regularities in the sample, and one suspects it is more a matter of language-specific morphological or phonological idiosyncrasies than general principles. Thus the elaborate networks of semantic relationships that have been sometimes constructed to account for syncretic patterns in Indo-European find little direct support from other language families, though the complete collapse of all non-core case distinctions, such as is found in Ingush, Georgian and Russian, does appear at least to support the notion of core vs. non-core as a morphosyntactic parameter.