Asymmetrical grammar: Optional and differential case marking

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1. Description

The aim of this workshop is to examine the phenomena of optional and differential case marking from descriptive, typological and theoretical perspectives. Optional case marking is the phenomenon whereby a case marker can be left out without affecting the role interpretation of the relevant nominal, but where its presence or absence does have pragmatic effects (see McGregor 2013). In this domain, attention has most recently been focused on optional ergative marking (e.g. McGregor & Verstraete 2010 on Australian and Papuan languages, Chelliah & Hyslop 2011 on Tibeto-Burman languages), but optionality is also found at the other end of the action chain, with optional object marking (e.g. Chappell 2006, 2013 on Sinitic, Iemmolo 2010 on Romance, Mardale 2009, 2012 on Romanian). Strictly speaking, differential case marking - as it is known in the literature - subsumes optional case marking, but in the context of this workshop we will restrict differential marking to the phenomenon whereby a language has two or more competing case markers for what appears to be the same semantic role. The classic case here is differential object marking (e.g. Bossong 1985, Aissen 2003), but there has also been some recent work on differential subject marking (e.g. de Hoop & de Swart 2008, Malchukov 2008, Fauconnier 2011) and even differential goal marking (e.g. Kittilä 2008).

The workshop will explore a broad range of questions relating to the description, typology and theoretical status of optional and differential case marking. These include:

- What are the meanings or discourse properties associated with optional case marking?
- Are these comparable for optional agent marking and optional object marking?
- What are the motivations, meanings or pragmatic effects associated with differential marking? – Are they determined by some kind of discourse saliency?
- Are these values comparable for differential agent, object and goal marking?
- How can one be sure that pairs of markers in an apparent differential system are part of one single system rather than distinct constructions?
- Are optional and differential case systems compatible with the idea of a single ‘basic’ clause structure with a ‘basic’ set of roles?
- Can optional and differential marking be regarded as one type of system?
- How are optional and differential systems distributed across the world? Are there any ‘hotbeds’, and do these correlate with any other features?
- How do optional and differential systems develop and what, specifically, are the main sources and grammaticalization pathways that can be identified? Is there cooptation from other parts of grammar, e.g. relating to information structure or discourse structure?

2. Schedule

The workshop will be organized as a series of five sessions exploring optional and differential case marking in a specific language family, a cross-linguistic sample or a theoretical model. Each talk is to be followed by a period of discussion time, with the whole series framed by a general introduction and summing up by the organizers. In three of the five sessions, we also plan to offer a forum to PhD students engaged in fieldwork, so they can present short field reports of relevant case phenomena in their languages, and receive feedback from the workshop’s speakers and participants. The speakers have been selected to represent a range of descriptive and theoretical issues as outlined above, as well as different geographic regions. The PhD students will be selected following an open call among the participants to the summer school.

Monday 5
80m: Introduction to the workshop
    - Introduction: phenomena, terminology, questions (Hilary Chappell, EHESS & J-C Verstraete, University of Leuven)
    - Case studies (= two areal surveys, to familiarize the participants with the phenomena)
        - Differential marking in Sinitic and beyond: the East and Southeast Asian context (Hilary Chappell)
        - Differential marking in Australia (J-C Verstraete)
30m: Discussion time

Tuesday 6
5m: Introduction
45m: Speaker 1
Optional case marking and other case-marking asymmetries: typological and theoretical perspectives (William McGregor, Aarhus University)
30m: Discussion time
30m: Field report by PhD student (15m) + discussion time (15m)

Thursday 8
5m: Introduction
45m: Speaker 2
Referential conditions on case: what’s where why? (Balthasar Bickel, University of Zürich)
30m: Discussion time
30m: Field report by PhD student (15m) + discussion time (15m)

Friday 9
5m: Introduction
45m: Speaker 3
Tense/aspect based differential subject marking (Helen de Hoop, Radboud University)
30m: Discussion time
30m: Field report by PhD student (15m) + discussion time (15m)

Saturday 10
5m: Introduction
40m: Speaker 4
Microvariation within Romance DOM (Alexandru Mardale, CNRS/LLF – Université Paris 7 & INALCO)
20m: Discussion time
10m: Summing up

3. Literature

A first selection of recent work is given below, including some classics, in the domain of optional and differential case marking.


4. Abstracts

Optional case marking: typological and theoretical perspectives (September 6th)
William B. McGregor, Aarhus University

This session is concerned with optional case marking – in particular with optional ergative and accusative case marking – from typological and theoretical perspectives. It presents a usage-based account of the phenomenon, according to which use vs. non-use of a case marker are never in totally free variation; case markers are used or not used by speakers in discourse to express and convey meanings. It is proposed that the cross-linguistic diversity of meanings that have been found to be associated with optional ergative and accusative case marking in recent years can be accounted for as specific contextualisations or instantiations of general meanings relating to joint attention. Specifically, it is suggested that there are natural and motivated associations between usage of case markers and prominence, and/or non-usage of case markers and backgrounding. Finally, optional case marking will be situated both formally and functionally in relation to other types of asymmetries in case systems and case marking.

Referential conditions on case: what’s where why? (September 7th)
Balthasar Bickel, University of Zürich

Surveys of the conditions that govern differential and optional case marking tend to reveal substantial variation across languages. In fact, the variation across these systems is on a par with the variation between these systems and several other morphosyntactic phenomena in which referential conditions affect how arguments are coded, including hierarchical case marking, differential agreement, differential scenarios, inversion and diathesis.

In this presentation I outline a comprehensive typology of referential conditions on argument marking, implemented to a large extent in an AUTOTYP database module (Witzlack-Makarevich et al. 2011). This typology allows us to locate more precisely the special properties of differential and optional case marking. An assessment of the world-wide distribution of various such properties suggests that the evolution of differential and optional case marking is significantly affected by large-scale areal spreads and less so by universal principles (Bickel et al. 2014)
Tense/aspect-based differential subject marking (September 9th)
Helen de Hoop, Radboud University (based on joint work with Sander Lestrade)

I will introduce an account for tense/aspect based differential subject marking, such as attested in Hindi for example, that also covers the distinction between stage- and individual level predicates found in Nepali and Manipuri (Poudel 2007). I will argue that if the role of an event participant can be determined on the basis of information available in the here and now, the use of case marking can be judged redundant and suspended because of economy. This straightforwardly accounts for differential subject marking in ergative languages that show ergative case on the A-argument when the event is situated in the past. Similarly, it can account for ergative case on the A-argument when the event is removed spatially. However, I will argue that the optimization procedure that is responsible for the assignment of ergative case can be grammaticalized in the sense that it is no longer applied in real-time, and the speaker does not really take into consideration whether the hearer can identify the agenthood of a participant. Agents of future events cannot be identified in the here and now either. Hence, we might predict ergative case marking on A-arguments in the future tense too. This is not attested, however (as far as I know). I will explain this in terms of a crucial difference between tense and aspect (cf. Malchukov & de Hoop 2011).


Poudel, Tikaram. 2007. Ergativity and stage/individual level predications in Manipuri Workshop on Differential Case Marking, Stuttgart.
**Microvariation within Romance DOM (September 10th)**

Alexandru Mardale (INaLCO - SeDyL UMR 8202 CNRS IRD – LABEX EFL)

It is well known that in certain Romance languages, the DO can be marked or not by a preposition: *a* in Spanish, Sardinian and other varieties, *pe* in Romanian. The occurrence of these prepositions depends on various parameters. Since Bossong 1985 and Aissen 2003, it is commonly assumed that there are (at least) three main parameters that determine object marking (DOM) cross-linguistically: (i) animacy, (ii) referentiality, and (iii) topicality. To each of these parameters are associated several scaled values: for animacy, human > animate > inanimate; for referentiality – often associated to definiteness (see Dobrovie-Sorin 1997, Aissen 2003, Laca 2006) –, definite > indefinite specific > indefinite non-specific; for topicality (see Leonetti 2003, Iemmolo 2010, Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011), +/- Top.

The goal of my presentation is (a) to sketch an hypothesis (in terms of Topic marker) for the development of DOM in Romance  (b) to examine the variation regarding DOM in Romance languages (depending on their sensitivity to one (or several) of the above-mentioned values) and (c) to discuss an analysis correlating DOM with the denotation of the noun.

This analysis is based on the semantic type of the DO (cf. Dobrovie-Sorin & Laca 2003, Bleam 2004, Mardale 2009, 2010) and concerns the following generalizations for DOM in (European) Spanish, Sardinian and Romanian:

(A) *the markers* *a* and *pe* *are excluded with generic DOs and with those that denote properties (i.e. that are not referential)*;  
(B) *the markers* *a* and *pe* *are obligatory with DOs referring to specific individuals or with universal quantifiers.*

I will show that this generalization must however be considered as a necessary but not sufficient condition for DOM since there are certain DOs denoting specific individuals that do not allow the markers. In these cases, the denotation of the noun does not trigger DOM and thus must be corroborated with the (human or animate) nature of its referent. The latter remark must be understood as a second necessary condition for DOM and it is observed differently by those languages depending on their sensitivity to the animacy parameter.


