

Dwarf cases in Estonian and elsewhere

Jussi Ylikoski (University of Oulu & Sámi University of Applied Sciences)

Abstract

Is Pluto a planet? It depends on what it means to be a planet. In 2019, many of us remember the time when Pluto was a planet, but planets are no longer what they used to be. On the other hand, the term “planet” was never officially defined before 2006, and it was not until this when the International Astronomical Union declared that Pluto was no longer a planet. Since then, Pluto has been called a dwarf planet. Not a small planet or a planet of any size, but a non-planet that meets the definition of the novel concept “dwarf planet”.

My talk will not be on planets or any other celestial objects, but instead, on morphological cases in Uralic languages. In fact, I will especially focus on minor case-like phenomena that have been neglected in the descriptions of case systems of individual languages, sometimes without any discussion whatsoever. Understanding the reluctance of mainstream grammarians to augment traditional case paradigms with dubious new cases, I wish to introduce some of my findings as “dwarf cases”. Most of my examples come from Estonian, Finnish and Saami languages, and my arguments for their case-like status are mainly syntactic, based on the common features of the West Uralic noun phrase.

I also wish to argue that the dwarf cases to be discussed are not necessarily new in itself, in the sense of being a result of recent grammaticalization. Instead, they may have existed for ages, but their case-like syntax has gone unnoticed in the absence of modern corpora of millions and billions of words. Modern tools help us continue our search for previously unknown grammatical phenomena in Uralic. At the same time, definitions for exactly what a case is vary and are often not even presented. Pluto has not been left out in the cold alone, but better telescopes have shown that there are more dwarf planets out there. Some day they might be called planets, too. Along the same line, some of the previously unnoticed dwarf cases might be regarded as new cases in the future.