

The partitive case in Finnish and Estonian: Unmarked, structural or semantic?

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Theories of syntax tend to make a distinction between structural and semantic (i.e., inherent, lexical, quirky) case marking. Semantic case is always associated with a semantic role or function. Structural case, in contrast, is determined on the basis of syntactic configuration. In derivational conceptions of grammar, there is also a notion of unmarked (or ‘default’/ ‘elsewhere’) case that is assigned to DPs/NPs when no other case is available (e.g., Marantz 1991, Baker 2015).

The partitive case in Finnish (as well as in Estonian) has turned out to be a puzzle for formal accounts in syntax: The partitive occurs in a variety of syntactic contexts marking the arguments (object, subject); adjuncts; complements of adpositions; modifiers, quantifiers and numerals in nominal phrases; and comparative constructions. It also interacts with the number (or countability) of a noun, suggesting that it is the partitive case which contributes partitivity reading to the noun it case-marks (Miljan, Kaiser & Vihman 2017).

In Finnish, the partitive case has been studied extensively from the perspective of generative derivational grammars (e.g., Vainikka 1993, Csirmaz 2012, Vainikka & Brattico 2014, Poole 2015), whereas Estonian data on partitive is essentially unaccounted for in formal (derivational) accounts (but see Norris 2018). Yet despite the extensive literature on Finnish partitive, there are many open questions, including:

- (i) *Is the partitive a structural case or semantic/inherent case?*
- (ii) *Is the partitive a default or an unmarked (complement) case (Vainikka 1993, Kiparsky 1998, Baker 2015 i.a.)?*
- (iii) *Is the partitive directly related to some semantic property (e.g., unboundedness (Heinämäki 1984) or divisibility (Csirmaz 2012))?*

In this talk, we will show that the partitive cannot be considered an unmarked (or default) case across the board. In particular, we provide evidence that the partitive is not an unmarked case in the complement of V (i.e. in the verb phrase), contrary to what has been proposed earlier by Vainikka (1993), Kiparsky (1998), Baker (2015), among others. To demonstrate this, we discuss case competition contexts, where a DP/NP has been assigned case several times during the derivation, i.e. ‘cyclic’ case assignment or case stacking.

Finnish and Estonian have no visible case stacking, therefore only one of the cases is morphologically realized in case competition contexts. It has been typically assumed that semantic/inherent case takes precedence over other case markers and structural case takes precedence over unmarked or default case (e.g. Marantz 1991). For example, this reasoning is adopted for Finnish nominal phrases by Brattico (2011) who argues that the NP in the complement of numeral can be assigned case twice in Finnish (the numeral assigns the partitive case to its complement, and if the NumP (numeral phrase) is assigned semantic case, the semantic case overrides the partitive).

We investigate three diagnostic properties for an unmarked case and show that these properties are not present in all constructions with the partitive case. That is, the partitive case is in many contexts immune to further case assignment – if the DP receives another case later in the derivation, the partitive case is not overridden by that case, suggesting that it must be a marked case.

In addition, certain instances of the partitive case, such as the partitive of negation, may override other structural case forms, which is a characteristic of semantic cases and points towards an analysis of semantic case. Furthermore, the partitive case is in some contexts

selective to the type of the DP (e.g., singular or plural, mass or count noun) and introduces semantic effects, which is unexpected for an unmarked case. While certain occurrences of partitive may still be considered as unmarked case, most instances of partitive in Finnish and Estonian do not pass one or more of these tests.

In addition to unmarked/marked distinction, we examine the structural vs. semantic/inherent case marking. We discuss evidence from case competition, case distribution and semantic properties associated with the partitive case marking. It turns out that the properties of the partitive case vary between constructions: the partitive may display more semantic characteristics in some constructions, while it appears to be more structural in others. What's more, some instances of the partitive case display mixed properties.

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