A synthesis for the structural/inherent case distinction and its comparative and diachronic consequences

The basic descriptive distinction between structural and inherent case has been established for some time. Structural case is assigned to DPs based on structural configurations, independent of specific lexical predicates and orthogonal to θ-roles, and can be affected by things like passivization, ECM and A-movement. Inherent case, in contrast, is sensitive to specific lexical verbs and prepositions, may be associated with particular θ-roles and remains constant under passivization, ECM and A-movement. Indeed, the distinction is secure enough to be used as a diagnostic (e.g. to distinguish raising from control predicates in Icelandic Sigurðsson, 2008). However, we still have no satisfactory unified theory of the distinction that can explain even the most central facts — e.g. why inherent case takes precedence over structural case, or why verbs which assign an inherent case to a higher argument typically assign structural nominative to a lower argument, rather than accusative. I will address these questions by proposing a synthesis of two competing approaches to case. The traditional view in GB/Minimalism has been that cases are features, assigned to (or checked on) DPs in the course of the syntactic derivation, and implicated in syntactic phenomena like A-movement, passivization and control. There is however an influential alternative (henceforth m-case) according to which case is assigned on the PF branch and thus is irrelevant for the narrow syntax (e.g. Marantz, 1991; Harley, 1995; McFadden, 2004; Sigurðsson, 2009). This position is motivated by systematic mismatches uncovered (initially in Icelandic, but subsequently more generally) between the distribution of morphological cases and the patterning of the relevant syntactic phenomena. A third view (henceforth KP), proposed e.g. by Lamontagne and Travis (1987); Bittner and Hale (1996); Neeleman and Weerman (1999), holds that (at least some) cases are not just features but syntactic projections. A version of this idea, under which different cases correspond to different amounts of structure above DP, was developed by Caha (2009) to explain a range of cross-linguistic patterns in syncretism and case inventories. M-case and KP would appear incompatible, moving in opposite directions from standard Case theory: m-case removes case features from the syntax to the PF branch, while KP reifies them in the syntax as functional heads. Yet each view allows important insights that would be lost if we were to reject it. Thus I will explore an approach in which KP is correct for inherent case, while m-case is correct for structural case. Specifically, inherent cases spell out syntactic structures along the lines of Caha. The nominal phrases bearing them are not just DPs but larger KPs of various sizes, as regulated by the narrow syntax. On the other hand, the structural cases are determined on the PF branch for nominal phrases that, in the narrow syntax, are just DPs. Here I adopt a dependent case approach (Marantz, 1991; Baker, 2015), in particular where m-cases serve to make DPs in the same spell-out domain sufficiently Distinct to be linearized, following Richards (2010). Being for purposes of linearization, the fact that it occurs on the PF branch is expected.

This framework allows a principled account of the split between structural and inherent case that captures the differences in their behavior. The additional structure above DP explains why inherent case is associated with semantic/thematic effects and allows us to model their distribution in terms of c-selection. E.g. while most transitive verbs in German select a DP internal argument (which will end up with structural nominative or accusative), *gedenken* 'commemorate' selects the larger structure that surfaces as genitive, while *helfen* 'help' selects the even larger structure of a dative. Inherent case is thus not 'assigned' to something that starts out as a DP, but is part of the nominal structure from the point when it is first-merged. This explains why inherent case takes precedence over structural case, which only comes into play on bare DPs. It also yields the stability of inherent cases under passivization and A-movement, since they spell out syntactic structures which cannot be created, destroyed or left behind by these processes. Structural cases, however, being determined post-syntactically according to the case-competition mechanisms of dependent case, will alternate when syntactic processes affect the distribution of DPs across spell-out domains (see Baker, 2015). Crucially, since inherent case-marked nominal phrases are actually KPs (of varying sizes), they will already be Distinct from any simple DPs in their local domain, and so they will neither be assigned dependent case nor be relevant for triggering dependent case on other DPs. This is why we typically get unmarked structural nominative rather than dependent accusative on a lower argument when the higher argument has inherent case. Following Řezáč (2008), we can also handle the fact that inherent case-marked nominals usually don't trigger agreement. The extra structure on top of DP creates a phase boundary that blocks access to the ϕ-features from outside. With structurally case-marked DPs, on the other hand, even if DP constitutes a phase, ϕ-features on D will be at the edge and hence accessible to Agree. Finally, the KP/DP distinction allows at least an approach to the difference between inherent and quirky case. If the relevant nominal phrases are extended nominal projections larger than DPs, syntactic phenomena may be sensitive to the distinction. Languages may then differ in whether these phenomena target DP specifically or nominal projections in general, much like languages differ in the extent to which they allow PPs to occupy subject positions. So A-movement and control in a language with classic 'inherent' case like German would care about DP, thus applying only to structurally case-marked nominals. In a language with classic 'quirky' case like Icelandic, they would target the full nominal extended projection, thus applying to whatever nominal phrase is highest in the relevant domain, whether a (structurally case-marked) DP or a larger (inherent case-marked) KP.

An important challenge for this approach is drawing the line between structural and inherent case and dealing

with phenomena that seem to straddle it. E.g. the structural/inherent status of the dative in various languages and contexts is a matter of continuing debate. Even the accusative, which is unambiguously structural on prototypical direct objects in many languages, has some uses that appear to be inherent, e.g. the sole argument of German verbs like *frieren* 'be cold' (McFadden, 2004). Furthermore, the patterns of syncretism that led Caha (2009) to posit his hierarchy of case heads involve all cases, with no clear dividing line between structural and inherent ones. How can these patterns be accommodated, if structural and inherent case involve distinct structural categories determined at different stages of the derivation? Relatedly, how are the distinctions among the structural cases actually encoded and implemented, such that they can interact correctly in terms of realization and syncretism with the inherent cases? I propose that Caha (2009)'s articulated structures, where the structural cases are part of the same hierarchy with the inherent ones, are in fact correct, but with two crucial modifications. First, nominative (as well as other unmarked cases like absolutive) corresponds to the complete lack of case structure, a bare DP, at all stages of the derivation (Bittner and Hale, 1996; McFadden and Sundaresan, 2010; Kornfilt and Preminger, 2015). Second, while the other structural cases do involve structure above DP, this is added post-syntacically. In the narrow syntax, they are bare DPs just like nominatives. The KP structure of inherent cases, in contrast, is present already in the narrow syntax. We can thus have both a structural accusative and an inherent accusative, both involving the same structure above DP, which is why they have the same forms. In inherent uses, this structure is present from the beginning in the narrow syntax, thus having all the characteristic inherent properties, but in structural uses, this structure is added by the mechanisms of dependent case assignment post-syntactically to what in the narrow syntax was a simple DP, capturing all of the characteristic structural properties. Viewing dependent case assignment in terms of projection of additional structure rather than assignment/valuation/checking of features is unorthodox and might seem to violate the Extension Condition, but it occurs on the PF branch, where this condition need not hold (see Levin, 2015, who also makes use of PF-insertion of KP, for discussion). Crucially, it unifies structural accusatives with nominatives as syntactic DPs, but also with inherent accusatives as post-syntactic KPs, thus completing the synthesis.

This synthesis offers a productive basis to address a number of classic comparative and diachronic questions about case. Syntactically speaking, the KP structures attributed to the inherent cases are essentially analogous to PPs. Thus, essentially following McFadden (2004); Caha (2009), the difference between prepositions and case markers is a (language-specific) matter of how syntactic structures are mapped onto morphophonology. This allows us to pursue the hypothesis that much of the syntax underlying inherent case is universal, not just among languages with rich case-marking systems, but also in those with no case at all. Since the structural cases exist only on the PF branch, however, they will be subject to greater variation, and languages may lack them entirely. This accords with typical observations about the loss of morphological case in language change: oblique and inherent case marking are often replaced by PPs, while structural case marking is reduced or disappears entirely (Blake, 2001). Furthermore, the details of dependent case theory make predictions about how this reduction and loss can be accommodated in innovative grammars. In colloquial English and Danish, e.g., the old nominative and accusative forms of pronouns now have a distribution that is radically different from what is found in typically nominative-accusative languages: the old nominative forms are restricted to unmodified, non-conjoined subjects of finite clauses, while the old accusatives are found everywhere else (Quinn, 2005; Sigurðsson, 2006; Parrott, 2007). It seems that the loss of the dative/accusative distinction and the spread of old accusative forms to certain predicative positions led new generations to conclude that they were the elsewhere. Under traditional approaches, such a state of affairs should have been analyzable in terms of finite T assigning nominative, with accusative as the elsewhere, yielding a pattern much closer to the PLD, where nominative is restricted to subjects of finite clauses (with e.g. left dislocated and predicate nominals being accusative), but appears consistently on these, even when modified or conjoined. But this is not what happened, which suggests that that is simply not a case system that UG makes available. Instead, in order to get the rather particuliar distribution of the old nominative forms and allow the old accusatives to be the elsewhere, acquirers were apparently led to give up on anything involving case. Parrott (2007) e.g. argues convincingly that the distribution of forms like *I* and *me* is best accounted for in terms of allomorphy. The only way to have an explicitly assigned nominative alongside an elsewhere accusative within a system of dependent case like Baker's — a 'marked nominative' like he posits for languages like Choctaw, assigned to any DP within TP **not** c-commanded by another DP — was not adopted by aqcuirers because of the lack of supporting evidence from non-pronominal DPs or from double nominative constructions (like those found in Choctaw), whereas an allomorphy-type analysis more naturally captures the restriction to pronouns. This shift from a dependent-case based to an allomorphy-based analysis of the pronominal forms then brought with it the change in the distribution of the forms that has made English and Danish so different from e.g. Old English, German and Swedish.

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