

Finnish and Estonian partitive case: In between structure and semantics

The partitive case in Finnish and Estonian appears in a wide variety of contexts: on the direct object, adverbials, (existential) subjects, comparative constructions, preposition phrases and in the complements and modifiers of nouns, quantifiers and numerals. Diachronically, the Finnic partitive developed from a locative case expressing a spatial relation with separative “from” meaning (VISK §1226). These days, partitive is taken to signal unboundedness (or divisibility) on the object, subject and nouns in an NP; it is obligatory with negation. Aspectual partitive on the object and partitive of negation occur only in the Baltic Finnic languages (Thomas 2003).

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 a.o.), whereas Estonian data on partitive is essentially unaccounted for. Many questions about Finnish and Estonian partitive still remain unanswered: Is it a structural case or semantic? Is it a default or unmarked complement case (Vainikka 1993, Kiparsky 1998, Baker 2015 a.o.) or directly related to some semantic property, e.g. divisibility (Csirmaz 2012)? Which aspects of partitive are shared in Estonian and Finnish and which are not?

In our talk, we investigate the Finnic partitive case in detail, including data which has gone unnoticed so far, i.e. partitive NP-modifiers in Estonian that are closely related to numeral-noun constructions and pseudo-partitive constructions in both languages. We examine the concepts of the default and unmarked case related to the partitive case assignment. When considering the distribution and behaviour of partitive in the two languages, it turns out that the partitive case has different properties in different contexts, and it is not that straightforward to analyse the Finnic partitive as a default case. We propose that in the object position, the partitive can be considered as a marked case, while within the DP, the partitive displays more intricate variation than previously thought.

Specifically, the partitive case on the object argument may express unbounded/imperfective aspect of an event both in Finnish and Estonian (ex.1a). The partitive case is typically in opposition with other object case markers, such as the genitive/accusative (GEN/ACC) on singular DPs (ex.1b), and often analyzed as the default or unmarked object case (Vainikka 1993, Kiparsky 1998, Baker 2015). The other object case markers are taken to express boundedness (Kiparsky 1998), divisibility (Csirmaz 2012) or an aspectual feature [+telic] (Kratzer 2004).

- (1) a. *Hän luki kirjaa.* FIN (Csirmaz 2012, 215-216)
s/he.NOM read.past.3sg book.PAR
'He read (some of) the/a book.' (natural endpoint not reached)
- b. *Hän luki kirjan.*
s/he.NOM read.past.3sg book.GEN/ACC
'He read (all of) the/a book.' (natural endpoint reached)

Recently, Vainikka & Brattico (2014) have shown that in Finnish, the GEN/ACC on the object occurs in the presence of subject-verb agreement associated with finite T/Agr. When the agreement is absent, the singular DP appears in nominative (NOM). Partitive, however, is immune to the case associated with the subject-verb agreement, which questions its status as a default case. Furthermore, in negated clauses, the partitive case overrides the GEN/ACC and NOM object cases in both Finnish and Estonian.

As for nominals, Norris (2018) argues that while the pseudo-partitives in Finnish (ex.2a) display properties of an inherent case, the partitive in Estonian pseudo-partitives (ex.2b) behaves as an unmarked case.

- (2) a. *Miten paljon kaloreita on litra-ssa maitoa?* FIN (Norris 2018)
how many calorie.PL.PAR are liter-INE milk.PAR
'How many calories are in a liter of milk?'

- b. *Kui palju kalore-id on liitri-s piima-s?* EST (Norris 2018)
 how many calorie-PL.PAR be.3 liter-INE milk-INE
 ‘How many calories are in a liter of milk?’

Yet an interesting piece of evidence against this analysis comes from partitive attributive modifiers in Estonian which are absent in Finnish (ex.3). These constructions have not been previously analyzed. They display properties of an inherent case similar to Finnish pseudo-partitives. Most importantly, the partitive case is immune to semantic case assignment:

- (3) *kollast värvi pliiats /pliiatsid /pliiatsitele* EST
 yellow.PAR.SG colour.PAR.SG pencil.NOM.SG /pencil.NOM.PL /pencil.PL.ADE
 ‘a yellow pencil/ yellow pencils /onto yellow pencils’

In Finnish and Estonian numeral-noun constructions, the noun occurs in the partitive case in the complement of a numeral (and certain quantifiers) (ex.4a). In these constructions, partitive can be overridden by semantic cases (ex.4b).

- (4) a. *kolm õuna* EST
kolme omenaa FIN
 three.NOM apple.PAR.SG
 ‘three apples’
 b. *kolmes *õuna õunas* EST
*kolmessa *omenaa omenassa* FIN
 three.NOM apple.PAR.SG apple.SG.INE
 ‘in three apples’

Thus, the Finnic partitive is an intriguing phenomenon with respect to (i) grammaticalization processes in the two languages, and (ii) its status as a default or marked case in grammar. A closer look at what is considered to be a default case reveals that the phenomenon is complex and opens up new questions: e.g. What aspects of a particular case, such as partitive, are language particular? To what extent does the grammaticalization process account for the differences in these closely related languages? We discuss these questions in the light of Finnish and Estonian data.

References

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