

On principles and parameters, universals and typology, in case and agreement systems

Mark Baker
Rutgers University

In this talk, I consider certain ways in which case marking patterns and agreement patterns can be mismatched in languages of the world, as well as certain mismatches that are evidently not allowed. These are offered in an effort to learn more about the fundamental nature of case and agreement within universal grammar, and what kind of parameters influence the typological patterns that we observe.

I begin with the reasonably well-known fact that quite a few languages have an ergative-absolutive case system but a nominative-accusative agreement system (e.g. Warlpiri, Burushaski, Kewa, Shipibo...) but no known language has a nominative-accusative case system and an ergative-absolutive agreement system. I show that careful reflection on this fact reveals that the principles/rules by which structural case is assigned are best thought of as small-scale but crucially syntactic parameters—contrary to the Borer-Chomsky Conjecture, according to which all parametric variation can be attributed to variation in the features of individual lexical or functional items. This typological asymmetry also argues against a very strong form of the Uniformity Hypothesis, according to which languages all have essentially the same case and agreement in the syntax, the only differences being which instances of case and agreement are realized overtly at PF. My argument against this kind of uniformity is based on the phenomenon of case-sensitive agreement, where a functional head can agree with an NP only if that NP has a specific case value. This type of agreement happens in the syntax, but it can only be sensitive to overt case distinctions, not to putatively universal but covert case categories. The best overall view, then, is that languages make different choices about what case assignment rules to apply in the syntax—a less-studied form of syntactic microparameterization.

I then extend the discussion by considering the relationship between ergative alignment patterns and so-called active alignment patterns, in which all agentive subjects are marked in one way, and all theme arguments (whether subject or object) are marked in another way. Here I highlight the fact that active languages are, if anything, more common than ergative languages in agreement-rich head marking languages. In contrast, active patterns are notably rarer than true ergative patterns within dependent marking languages (see Mithun 1991, Dixon 1995, Comrie 2005, etc.); indeed there may be no convincing cases. This broad typological asymmetry is also found internal to the grammar of particular languages: some have active agreement alongside ergative case marking (Choctaw, Koasati, Burushaski), but none have ergative agreement alongside active case marking. I show that this is exactly what we expect from dependent case theory (Marantz 1991, Baker 2015, etc.), in which case is assigned independently of agreement, based only on the number of NPs in the clause plus their hierarchical relationship—not by the thematic roles of the NPs or their relationship to agreeing heads. In short, agreement is a relationship between functional heads (T, v, ...) and NPs, so it can show an active pattern based on where the NPs are relative to the functional heads, but case is a relationship between NPs in the clause, so it is sensitive only to the position of NPs relative to each other, regardless of functional heads.

Another clear consequence of these lines of thought is that case and agreement are not in general to be thought of as two sides of the same coin, as in much work within the minimalist program. However, I offer these as two positive examples of the convergence and synergy that is possible between top-down theoretical research and typological investigations into how linguistic features correlate over a wide range of languages.