

Peripheral cases: Deviations in morphological case at the clausal edge

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

(University of Amsterdam / University of Potsdam)

Morphological case marking is traditionally associated with establishing morphophonological cues that help the receiver identify the syntactic function of a nominal expression (DP). As pointed out by Pintzuk (2002), traditional explanations regarding the changes between Old English and Middle English argued for a direct causal link between the emergence of a relatively impoverished morphology and a relatively fixed word order (with either one or the other factor identified as a cause). Considerations along these lines imply that morphological case marking should be especially important in settings in which the DP is not adjacent to its licenser. Such settings regularly arise when DPs move to the clausal edge. Examining the particular configurations of relative clauses and elliptical comparative clauses in English and German, this talk shows that specifically in the absence of a local case assigner, morphological case may deviate from what would be canonically computed based on abstract Case. The deviations are either instances of (i) resorting to a default (or less marked) case, or (ii) abstract Case being overridden by the presence of another, local case assigner. The findings corroborate the findings of Pintzuk (2002) for Old English object placement and also prevalent assumptions of Distributed Morphology, such as the Late Insertion of Vocabulary Items (Halle & Marantz 1993) in general and the post-syntactic insertion of contextual inflection (“ornamental morphology”, Embick & Noyer 2007) in particular. Therefore, rather than acting as conserving environments, such settings may even be triggers of change in the case system.

References

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