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## Theories of case (review)

Helen de Hoop

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## REVIEWS

**Theories of case.** By MIRIAM BUTT. (Cambridge textbooks in linguistics.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 258. ISBN 9780521797313. \$37.99.

Reviewed by HELEN DE HOOP, *Radboud University Nijmegen*

The first sentence of the introductory chapter states that the book is meant to serve as an introduction to various notions of case within modern theoretical linguistics. In fact, the book is much more than that. It not only provides an introduction to theories of case, but moreover puts together the various notions and insights coming from these theories in an illuminating way.

The first chapter ('Introduction', 1–11) introduces the topic of the book: case. The important question addressed in this chapter is what the exact range of phenomena is that can be properly labeled 'case'. Notoriously, case is used to mark the semantic relationships between verbs and their arguments. But while some languages encode this relationship via morphological case, languages such as English encode it structurally, that is, in terms of designated positions. Thus, word order or structural position might be conceived of as an alternative strategy for marking the relationship between a verb and its arguments, and in that sense, it can be viewed as 'case' as well, which is of course a very common perspective in generative syntax. It is also clear, however, that word order and overt case marking are not truly alternative strategies for marking the relationship between a predicate and its argument since they are not complementary. Some languages have no case but yet a lot of word-order freedom, while other languages have both case and a strict word order. Similar problems as to what counts as 'case' are discussed with respect to head-marking versus dependent-marking languages, adverbial and nominal case, case stacking, and case and finiteness. Butt concludes that the notion of case employed in syntactic theories is an abstract notion used to characterize the interaction between verbal semantics, grammatical relations, and word order. The rest of the book is devoted to three guiding themes in order to allow for comparison across the theories: thematic roles, grammatical relations, and not surprisingly, overt case. Recurring topics throughout the other chapters are transitivity, unaccusativity, passivization, quirky case, and ergativity.

Ch. 2 ('Foundational perspectives', 12–22) explains how modern theories of case developed from ancient traditions. B argues that due to the use of the Greek and Roman naming of cases, the fundamental assumption that case must be tied directly to semantics is still implicit in modern syntactic theorizing. This stands in stark contrast to the Indian tradition, where the case markers were simply numbered rather than associated directly with certain semantics. In the Arabic tradition, case is embedded within a larger theory of government in which the governor (a verb, preposition, or nominal) strictly determines the form of the governed element. This view led to a differentiation between two levels of representation at which government can take place, an underlying and a surface level of representation, reminiscent of certain versions of generative syntax.

Ch. 3 ('Grammatical relations', 23–45) and Ch. 4 ('Structural case', 46–90) focus on the development of modern syntax (1950s onward). In early theories, such as transformational grammar and in particular relational grammar, grammatical relations were understood as abstract syntactic concepts that mediate between verbal semantics and case morphology. In Ch. 3 thematic roles in interaction with grammatical relations are introduced, while Ch. 4 explores the basic approach to case within the generative theories of government and binding and the minimalist program. In generative syntax, grammatical relations are associated with the assignment of structural (abstract) case. B argues that in contemporary generative syntax there is a trend toward incorporating ever more precise semantics into the structural representations.

Ch. 5 ('Linking theories', 91–149) surveys a number of important linking theories, in particular Joan Bresnan's lexical functional grammar (LFG), Paul Kiparsky's linking theory, and Dieter Wunderlich's lexical decomposition grammar, theories of how predicate-argument structures are linked to syntactic structures. In these three approaches to argument linking, a number of features

play an important role. In LFG, the two relevant features are [+/-restricted], which refers to the semantic restrictedness of a thematic role or a grammatical function, and [+/-objective], which deals with the degree of 'objecthood' of a certain thematic role, that is, whether it is likely to be linked to the grammatical function of object. In the linking theories of Wunderlich and Kiparsky, the features that play an important role deal with the classification of arguments and case in terms of the underlying predicate-argument structure. That is, ergative case may be analyzed as [+lr] meaning 'there is a lower role/argument' (Wunderlich) or as [+HR] 'I am the highest role/argument' (Kiparsky). Recent versions of Kiparsky's and Wunderlich's linking theories assume an optimality-theoretic (OT) perspective, but a discussion of OT is postponed until Ch. 8.

Ch. 6 ('The ergative dragon', 153–87) is my favorite chapter as it clearly reveals B's own fascination with ergative case and presents refreshing insights on the multiheaded dragon of ergativity, which B does not try to fight but only to catch. Although, as B states in the beginning, in one chapter one cannot do justice to 'the nightmarish complexity of the literature' (153), the chapter contains a lot more than just a useful overview of the relevant issues. It discusses the history of describing and analyzing ergativity, types of ergativity, a wide variety of ergative phenomena, the acquisition of ergative case, and the rise and loss of ergativity. With respect to the well-known accusative-to-ergative shift in Indo-Iranian, B argues that this is in fact dubious. She presents alternative views on this alleged shift, such as the alternative scenario sketched in Butt 2001 in which it is not the case system that changes, but rather the division of labor among the individual case markers that realize the semantic distinctions that are to be expressed. One conclusion drawn from the discussion is that the ergative–accusative opposition is far too simple to analyze the case systems in the languages of the world with.

Semantically motivated case alternations of objects and subjects are the topic of Ch. 7 ('The semantics of case', 188–201). Case alternations are discussed that are based on semantic differences in specificity, aspect (boundedness), control, and modality. These case alternations take place in otherwise identical linguistic contexts. Thus, any difference in meaning that arises must be due to the difference in case. For example, in Turkish, in the same linguistic context of 'Ali wants to rent a piano', 'a piano' gets a specific reading when it bears an accusative case marker, while it gets a nonspecific reading when it lacks this marker. Similarly, in Bengali, in the same linguistic context of 'I want you', 'I' can be in the nominative or in the genitive case. When it is in the nominative, it is interpreted as being in control ('I want you'), but when it is in the genitive, it is interpreted as not being in control ('I need you'). As B concludes, however, more work needs to be done with respect to identifying, understanding, and analyzing these differential case-marking phenomena.

The final chapter ('More theories great and small', 202–27) discusses role-and-reference grammar and OT, two theories that have a lot to say about the mapping between predicate-argument structure and overt case. In the concluding section of the book, B points out that a full understanding of case can only be achieved by a pooling of data and perspectives. Clearly, then, her book can serve as a source of inspiration for every linguist interested in the rich system of case in natural language.

#### REFERENCE

- BUTT, MIRIAM. 2001. A reexamination of the accusative to ergative shift in Indo-Aryan. *Time over matter: Diachronic perspectives on morphosyntax*, ed. by Miriam Butt and Tracy Holloway King, 105–41. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

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