

A case for Case in Algonquian

In languages with impoverished case morphology such as English, it is standard to assume that abstract Case is nevertheless active in the syntax (Chomsky 1980, 1981). But what about languages with no case morphology at all, such as those in the Algonquian family? Halle & Marantz (1993) make extensive use of abstract Case in their analysis of Potawatomi, but others argue that Algonquian languages lack Case entirely (e.g. Ritter & Rosen 2005). I concur with Lochbihler (2012) that the core morphosyntax of Algonquian languages, particularly the direct-inverse alignment pattern, can be derived through Agree with no need to posit abstract Case. However, in this talk I argue that we do still need to posit abstract Case (or some equivalent notion) in order to capture some relatively shallow details in the realization of agreement morphology.

I begin by showing that the realization of portmanteau agreement morphology can be captured only if we allow vocabulary items to be conditioned by Case features in addition to phi-features. I then show that by adding Case features to the analysis, we also gain an explanation for why the Conjunct Order morphology sometimes displays a preference for subject agreement, even when this violates the person hierarchy. I conclude by showing that the proposed analysis is consistent with a gradual diachronic dwindling in the role of Case in Algonquian.

Portmanteau agreement

The Algonquian “Conjunct Order” inflection includes a person/number agreement slot known as the CENTRAL SUFFIX (Goddard 1979; Nichols 1980). Most central suffixes index only a single argument, but certain transitive forms display an archaic portmanteau central suffix dedicated to a particular subject-object combination, such as *-angid* 1PL→3 and *-amind* 3→1PL in Nipissing Ojibwe (Jones 1977). Since *-angid* and *-amind* are both conditioned by the same phi-feature combination (1PL + 3), phi-features alone are not sufficient to differentiate the two suffixes. We need some sort of syntactic diacritic to indicate that *-angid* appears when the 1PL argument is the SUBJECT while *-amind* appears when the 1PL argument is the OBJECT. A Case feature is the obvious solution: *-angid* reflects [1PL, NOM] while *-amind* reflects [1PL, ACC], as in (1).

- (1) *-angid* ↔ {[1PL, NOM], [3]}
-amind ↔ {[1PL, ACC], [3]}

Some Ojibwe dialects, such as Odawa (Valentine 2001), have lost the *-amind* suffix (3→1PL) and now use the *-angid* suffix symmetrically in both 1PL→3 and 3→1PL forms. To capture this change, we can simply posit that *-angid* in Odawa is no longer conditioned by Case features and can thus be spelled out in any 1PL+3 form, regardless of whether 1PL is the subject or the object:

- (2) *-angid* ↔ {[1PL], [3]}

The variation across Ojibwe shows that portmanteau agreement morphology can be conditioned by grammatical functions (Nipissing *-angid* 1PL→3 vs. *-amind* 3→1PL) but can also be neutral to grammatical functions (Odawa *-angid* 1PL↔3). An analysis must be able to handle both possibilities. This is easy to do if we allow morphological rules to be conditioned by Case features in addition to phi-features. Such a move is only possible if Case does indeed exist in the language.

An exceptional preference for subject agreement

The spellout of most Algonquian agreement morphology is conditioned by a 2 > 1 > 3 person hierarchy (see Harley & Ritter 2002 and Béjar 2003 for analyses). However, some Conjunct forms instead display a preference to agree with the subject regardless of its rank on the person

hierarchy (Bhatia et al. 2016; Xu 2016). This subject preference is unusual, as the rest of the central agreement system, including most of the Conjunct, treats subjects and objects symmetrically.

Consider the 1SG→2SG and 2SG→1SG forms. The person hierarchy predicts that the central agreement should index the 2SG argument in both forms—as, indeed, it does in the “Independent Order” inflection that occurs in main clauses. In the Conjunct Order, however, the central suffix instead indexes the SUBJECT in both forms. In Nipissing, for example, the 1SG→2SG form has the 1SG suffix *-a:n* while the 2SG→1SG form has the 2SG suffix *-an*. Evidence from the patterning of inverse marking makes it clear that the syntactic Agree operation targets both arguments in these forms (Oxford 2016), so why does the spellout of agreement morphology favour the subject?

Case provides an answer. I propose that the *-a:n* 1SG and *-an* 2SG agreement suffixes are in fact conditioned by [NOM] Case in addition to phi-features, as shown in (3).

- (3) *-a:n* ↔ [1SG, NOM]
-an ↔ [2SG, NOM]

Under this analysis, *-a:n* and *-an* differ from most central agreement suffixes in that they are specialized for agreement with subjects: *-a:n* can only be used to index a 1SG subject and *-an* can only be used to index a 2SG subject. It now follows that the 1SG→2SG and 2SG→1SG forms uniformly display subject agreement, as this is the only agreement morphology that is available.

The spellout rules in (3) provide the key to an even more flagrant violation of the person hierarchy: in the 3→1s and 3→2s forms in the Conjunct Order, the central agreement indexes the third-person subject (Nipissing *-d* 3) rather than the SAP object (Nipissing *-a:n* 1SG, *-an* 2SG). Given that Algonquian morphosyntax displays a very strong SAP > 3 preference, the appearance of third-person agreement in these forms is quite surprising. But it follows from the rules in (3): if the *-a:n* and *-an* suffixes are in fact specialized for NOMINATIVE SAP arguments, then these suffixes will naturally be excluded from 3→1s and 3→2s forms, in which the SAP arguments are accusative. The only alternative in such forms is to spell out the third-person argument instead (*-d* ↔ [3]), which gives us the attested subject-agreement pattern. Overall, then, the surprising emergence of a preference for subject agreement in certain Conjunct forms can be traced back to a very simple source: the presence of a [NOM] feature in the two spellout rules in (3).

Diachronic considerations

There are various indications that abstract Case is an archaic and dwindling component of the Algonquian agreement system. Case plays a role in the Conjunct inflection but not in the Independent inflection, which is a more recent innovation (Goddard 1974). Within the Conjunct, the stronghold of Case is the portmanteau suffixes, which are particularly archaic, as indicated by their opaque internal structure and their gradual loss in many daughter languages. Since Case effects are found only in the most archaic corners of the inflectional system, I suggest that we are observing the last remnants of a case system that may once have been much more robust. Algonquian languages are not Caseless, but the overt manifestations of Case are limited and declining.

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