Licensing of dative case in four Nordic languages

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1 Introduction. Scandinavian languages provide a rich basis for microcomparison in the distribution of the dative case. I discuss four examples and base the empirical observations in a licensing theory of dative case, integrated in a larger theory of abstract case.

2. Descriptive generalizations.

2.1 Icelandic. It is well documented that Icelandic has expanded the domain of dative compared to Old Norse. The expression "dative sickness" is a pejorative term for the use of dative case in contexts which are not historically dative. In addition to certain experiencer subjects, dative has also spread to objects of verbs of ballistic motion, including neologisms (Barðdal). Not every domain of the dative has been expanded, e.g. some instrumental uses have been lost, but these were not central in Old Norse and on the whole dative has advanced.

2.2 Faroese. Faroese has extended its use of the dative on benefactive indirect objects, compared with Old Norse (Thráinsson). However, Faroese has also lost a number of dative arguments compared with Old Norse. Thus, it cannot be said of Faroese that dative in general has expanded its domain, only shifted it.

2.3 Övdalian. Classic Övdalian, as described by Levander, can similarly be said to have changed the domain of the dative, but in a direction different from that of Faroese. Classic Övdalian has innovated a dative possessor not found in Old Norse. But at the same time, it has severely cut back on the use of dative with experiencers, thus cannot be said to have straightforwardly expanded the domain of the dative.

2.4 Norwegian. Certain Norwegian dialects, including some spoken in Romsdal, preserve a dative case in a limited number of contexts. By and large, this dative can be said to be restricted compared to Old Norse, and is used mainly on indirect objects and the complements of certain prepositions. Yet even here, the picture is slightly more complicated, in that some prepositions which did not take dative in Old Norse do take dative in Romsdal.

3. Theory of Case. The complexity of the situation shows that the correct theory of case is not a simple linear one, in which the set of dative licensers in each language is a subset of the licensers in another. On the other hand, typological work on case (Blake, Butt, Malchukov & Spencer, etc.) shows that case systems do not vary unrestrictedly. There is a reason that we continue to use the label 'dative' both for a case in Latin and a corresponding case in Turkish, Japanese, Warlpiri, and these four Nordic languages. Thus a general theory of case must be constrained enough to capture the crosslinguistic limits on variation but at the same time be able to describe the situation in these four related languages.

The general theory of case which I propose here is the following. Any extended projection which is embedded in another must be licensed. When the licensee is an extended projection of N, the licensing relation is called case. I model this formally in a version of the 'uninterpretable feature' theory of case (Pesetsky & Torrego): Overt morphological case is the expression of an uninterpretable instantiation of a feature which is interpretable only on the licenser, which might be a category in a verbal or prepositional projection.

A given category may serve or not serve as a case licenser in a given language, but functional considerations lead to most languages having some way of licensing a 'subject' (licensing by some head in the T domain, in a nominative-accusative language) and an 'object' (licensing by some lower head in the extended projection of V, possibly an Asp head, in a nominative-accusative language). These can then be called nominative and accusative, respectively.

If there is a distinct class of licensers for indirect objects (an applicative head, in the sense of Pylkkänen), then the case licensed is called dative. Functional heads have clusters of semantic properties which make them more or less similar to each other. Experiencer v_{exp} shares some

properties with Appl (introduces an argument 'above' another subevent) and thus may be classed with Appl for the purposes of case, in which case experiencer subjects can be assigned dative.

Similarly, if C in a given language licenses a hanging topic, then it licenses a noun phrase and hence assigns case. It could either assign a special 'topic' case (as in Japanese), or it could assign a case that is morphologically indistinct from some other case. Of the other case assigners, T is semantically the most similar to C, so if the case on hanging topics is syncretized with any other case, it will be syncretized with the nominative (as in Icelandic). A prepositional head, on the other hand, might be semantically more like an applicative, hence assign dative, or more like Asp, hence assign accusative . Or a language might distinguish it from both, and have a distinct prepositional case (as in Russian).

Thus, universally, case is assigned by a class of functional heads, which are grouped and classified according to semantically interpretable features. Surface cases in most languages simply underspecify the exact identity of the licenser, so that a single case appears in multiple contexts. Languages make cuts in different places, when there are multiple features involved, e.g. [poss,exp] could be classed together with [poss] or more like [exp].

Any head in a syntactic structure needs to be lexicalized, or 'spelled out.' Morphological productivity has to do with what lexical items a language has to spell out a given head. A head with only a small number of potential lexicalizers is not productive, for example ditransitive verbs are the only lexicalizers for dative-assigning Appl in Icelandic, so benefactive indirect objects are not productive. A language can gain or lose lexicalizers, making a phenomenon more or less productive. If it innovates a free morpheme for a given head (possibly null), then the phenomenon becomes fully productive.

4. Analysis. The core dative assigner is a low applicative head Appl, which is lexically incorporated into a closed class of verbs like 'give.' Any head which is semantically similar to it and which is designated as a case assigner can be grouped with it in a given language's case system.

4.1 Icelandic. In Icelandic, there is no free lexicalizer for Appl, which continues to be lexically restricted, so there are no free benefactives. A meaning component in ballistic motion verbs (proc_{Mot}) has been identified semantically with Appl, because like Appl it introduces a distinct subevent compared with the initiating or causing event (along the lines suggested by Svenonius). At the same time, an experiencer-introducing head (v_{Exp}) with similar Aktionsartal properties (i.e. introducing a distinct subevent) has become productive (i.e. a null lexicalizer for it has been innovated), leading to "dative sickness." These two changes contribute substantially to the spread of dative in Icelandic, compared with Old Norse.

4.2 Faroese. Faroese has innovated a null lexicalizer for Appl. This allows Faroese to appear with 'free benefactives' which are not possible in Icelandic. However, a low dative-introducing head in Faroese has become less productive, by losing its lexicalizers, hence the range of dative secondary objects has retreated, compared to Old Norse (and to Icelandic).

4.3 Övdalian. In Icelandic, the possessive head Poss licenses genitive case, but Övdalian has lost this case, which has been reanalyzed as a possessive clitic lexicalizing Poss. This raises the question of what case is assigned to the possessor. Just as in some German dialects, the answer is dative; in other words, there is a semantic similarity between Poss and Appl which is recognized by Övdalian in the case system. At the same time, Övdalian has replaced many dative experiencers with nominatives, suggesting that it has developed a more restrictive interpretation for v_{Exp}.

4.4 Norwegian. In Norwegian, the defining characteristics of dative have been redefined to exclude v_{Exp} but to include a number of prepositions which were not included in Old Norse. This means that dative appears on many prepositional objects, as well as with a lexically restricted set of the original ditransitives benefactives, but not on experiencers.