

Non-lexical Case Assignment in the Finnish Language^{*1}

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0. Introduction

In the Finnish language the nominative case is used to mark not only the subject but also the object. For example:

(1) *Lue kirja loppuun!*
 read-imp.-2.sg. book-nom.sg. end-illat.sg.

Read the book to the end!

(2) *Kirja luettiin loppuun.*
 book-nom.sg. read-pass.p. end-illat.sg.

The book was read to the end.

In the sentence (1), whose predicate is in the imperative mood, the object is indicated in the nominative case. Also in the impersonal passive sentence (2), the object is not in the genitive case but in the nominative case. Both in the imperative sentence and in the impersonal passive sentence, the object cannot be marked in the genitive case¹⁾.

In my previous papers(1999, 2001), I have tried to explain the reason not only the subject but also the object can be marked in the nominative case. I have proposed there that the concept 'primary participant' should be introduced. That is, an argument is marked in the nominative case if and only if it serves as the primary participant. However, what is the 'primary participant'? I have defined it as an argument that is most deeply involved in the situation described in the sentence. But how can one determine which argument is 'most deeply involved in the situation'? I cannot but say the concept 'primary participant' is somewhat ambiguous. The purpose of this paper is to present a still more suitable explanation for the distribution of the nominative case and the genitive case in the Finnish language.

1. Semantic macroroles

In the Finnish language there are two types of case assignment. One is the lexical case assignment and the other is the non-lexical case assignment. The lexical case

assignment means that an argument is marked in a suitable case according to its lexical property. In other words, there is a direct relationship between the thematic role it serves and the morphological case assigned to it. For example, if an argument serves as the locative participant, it is indicated in the locative case. To take a simple example:

(3) *Pihalla on lapsia.*
 yard-adess.sg. is-3.sg.pr. child-part.pl.

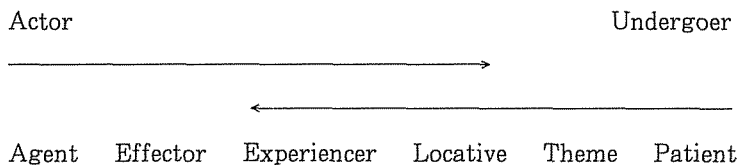
In the yard there are children.

In this sentence the initial noun phrase are marked in the adessive case, one of the locative cases available in the Finnish language, since it functions as the locative participant in the situation described in the sentence.

On the other hand, such a relation does not hold for the non-lexical case assignment. For instance, it appears that the nominative case can be assigned not only to the agent but also to the patient, as is shown in (1) and (2) above. It does not mean, however, that the thematic role is entirely irrelevant to the non-lexical case assignment. The nominative case is most typically assigned to the agent, while the patient is the most typical candidate to be marked in the genitive case.

To describe such a situation it may be useful to introduce the concept 'semantic macrorole'. This concept comprises two macroroles: the actor and the undergoer. These are the two primary arguments of a transitive predicate. They are called 'macroroles' because each subsumes a number of specific thematic roles. According to Van Valin(1993:43), "macroroles are motivated by the fact that in grammatical constructions group of thematic relations are treated alike." With regard to the case assignment, for example, among languages it is common that the agent, the effector and the experiencer are all marked in the nominative case. This is not an accident, and this fact can be captured in terms of semantic macroroles. That is to say, the agent, the effector and the experiencer can be subsumed under the actor, one of the two semantic macroroles, and this is the reason they are similarly marked in the nominative case. In the same way, in many languages the patient, the theme and the experiencer are all marked in the accusative case, since they are the thematic roles that can be subsumed under the undergoer. It is difficult to determine how many thematic roles should be posited for the linguistic theory, but it is certain that there is a linear series of dependencies between the thematic roles. Van Valin(1993:44) proposed the following Actor-Undergoer Hierarchy. That is:

(4) Actor-Undergoer Hierarchy



This hierarchy says simply that “the argument bearing the thematic relation that appears leftmost on the cline will be the actor and that the argument bearing the thematic relation that appears rightmost on it will be the undergoer.” (*ibid*) Such a ranking of thematic roles with respect to actor and undergoer selection is supported by considerable cross-linguistic evidence, as is shown in Van Valin(1993) and many others.

Let us now return to the non-lexical case assignment in the Finnish language. Can the nominative marking be suitably explained by referring to the actor-undergoer hierarchy? As I said earlier, the nominative case is most typically assigned to the agent. On the other hand, the agent is maximally unmarked as the actor, since it appears leftmost in the actor-undergoer hierarchy. What should be noticed here is, however, that in some cases as (1) and (2) above the nominative case is apparently assigned to the patient. If this is the case, the hierarchy is not valid for the explanation of the nominative marking in the Finnish language, since the patient cannot be considered to be the actor participant.

2. Arguments marked in the nominative case

Let us now recollect what arguments can be indicated in the nominative case in the Finnish language. First of all, the subject is usually marked in the nominative case. To take a simple example:

- (5) *Pekka luki kirjan.*
 P.-nom. read-3.sg.p. book-gen.sg.
 Pekka read the book.

The initial noun phrase, which serves obviously as an actor participant, is the subject of this sentence, and is indicated in the nominative case.

Both in the existential sentence and in the possessive construction the post-verbal noun phrase can be marked in the nominative case. Take the following for example:

- (6) *Pihalla on lapsi.*
 yard-adess.sg. is-3.sg.pr. child-nom.sg.

In the yard there is a child.

In this sentence the post-verbal theme argument is indicated in the nominative case.

In the Finnish language, also the object can be marked in the nominative case, as I said at the outset with reference to the imperative sentence and the impersonal passive sentence. I repeat the examples as (7) and (8) for convenience.

(7) *Lue kirja loppuun!*
 read-imp.-2.sg. book-nom.sg. end-illat.sg.

Read the book to the end! (= (1))

(8) *Kirja luettiin loppuun.*
 book-nom.sg. read-pass.p. end-illat.sg.

The book was read to the end. (= (2))

Another example is:

(9) *Sinun täytyy lukea kirja loppuun.*
 you-gen.sg. must-3.sg.pr. read-1.inf. book-nom.sg. end-illat.sg.

You must read the book to the end.

This sentence is an instance of the neccessive construction. The matrix predicate of this construction is always accompanied by a first infinitive, and this construction expresses an obligation of the referent of the subject of the first infinitive. Although the subject of the first infinitive is always marked in the genitive case, the genitive case is not available for the object of the first infinitive. Instead, in (9) the nominative case is assigned to the object.

The nominative marking of the object of a first infinitive is not confined to the neccessive construction. For example:

(10) *Yritä keksiä uusi kone!*
 try-imp.-2.sg. invent-1.inf. new-nom.sg. machine-nom.sg.

Try to invent a new machine!

This is an imperative sentence, and the nominative marking of the object in (7) and (10) may be explained on similar lines. Here is, however, another example. That is:

(11) *Lautakunta hyläsi suunnitelman manipuloida geeni.*
 committee-nom.sg. reject-3.sg.p. plan-gen.sg. manipulate-1.inf. gene-nom.sg.

The committee rejected the plan to manipulate the gene.

In this sentence the first infinitive, together with its object in the nominative case, modifies the preceding noun phrase.

Also the object of a third infinitive is sometimes marked in the nominative case.

Take the following for example:

- (12) *Kehota Pekkaa keksimään uusi kone!*
 encourage-imp.-2.sg. P.-part. invent-3.inf.illat. new-nom.sg. machine-nom.sg.
 Encourage Pekka to invent a new machine!

This again is an imperative sentence. Another example is:

- (13) *Se tapahtuu manipuloimalla geeni.*
 it-nom.sg. happen-3.sg.pr. manipulate-3.inf.adess. gene-nom.sg.
 It happens by manipulating the gene.

Here, the third infinitive adessive with its object functions as an adjunct of the matrix clause, and the object is marked in the nominative case.

Another example occurs in an infinitival clause whose predicate is a second infinitive instructive. That is:

- (14) *Virhemarginaali huomioon ottaenkin ero on raju.*
 margin of error-nom.sg. attention-illat.sg. take-2.inf.instruct. difference-nom.sg.
 is-3.sg.pr. sharp-nom.sg.

Considering the margin of error, the difference is still sharp. (SK87:22-203) ²⁾

Also in this sentence the infinitival clause serves as an adjunct of the matrix clause.

It is clear from the examples (6)-(14) that the nominative case can be assigned to arguments other than the actor participant. What is important to note is that in the existential sentence and in the possessive construction the theme argument is marked in the nominative case. This argument cannot be regarded either as an actor participant or as an undergoer participant, considering the meaning conveyed in the sentence in question. To put it another way, the theme argument is neutral with respect to the distinction between the actor participant and the undergoer participant. Then, it is possible to build up a hypothesis. That is, in the Finnish language not only the actor participant but also the argument that is neither the actor nor the undergoer can be indicated in the nominative case. In other words, an argument can be marked in the nominative case unless it functions as an undergoer participant.

This hypothesis, however, seems to fail to account for the nominative marking of the object in (7)-(14). Since the argument in question is the object, it is the undergoer, isn't it? The point to observe is that in (7)-(14) there appears no subject marked in the nominative case. This means that in these sentences the actor participant is suppressed. If this is the case, the argument in question in (7)-(14) cannot be a full-fledged

undergoer participant, because the undergoer presupposes the existence of the actor participant. In (9) the subject of the first infinitive is overtly expressed indeed, but it is marked in the genitive case. This omissible genitive-marked subject cannot be considered to be a full-fledged actor participant, since its referent does not act voluntarily but is obliged to act in the way described by the infinitive. We should not overlook that the genitive marking of the subject is not the sufficient condition for the nominative marking of the object. Take the following for example:

(15) *Pekka kertoi Liisan keksineen uuden koneen.*

P.-nom. tell-3.sg.p. L-gen.sg. invent-p.p. new-gen.sg. machine-gen.sg.

Pekka told that Liisa had invented a new machine.

This is an instance of the participial construction. In the subordinate clause the object of the past participle active is marked in the genitive case, although its subject is indicated in the genitive case. This is because what is described in the subordinate clause is not a state but the action performed by the referent of the subject, and the subject is therefore considered to be a full-fledged actor participant.

From these observations one can safely state that in the sentences (7)-(14), as in the existential sentence and the possessive construction, the distinction between the actor and the undergoer is neutralized. This leads us to an assumption that the object marked in the nominative case functions as the theme argument just like the post-verbal argument of the existential sentence and the possessive construction.

This assumption can be justified by considering the meaning conveyed by the sentences or the clauses whose object is marked in the nominative case. To begin with, what is described in the imperative sentence is not an action itself but an obligation to perform it. This means that in this type of sentence the achievement of a desired state is much more important than the process by which a desired state is achieved. The same is true of the necessive construction. Next, also in the impersonal passive sentence, what is described is not an action, since the referent of the subject is not specified. In this type of sentence a resultant state of the performed action is described. Furthermore, the infinitival clause in (11) does not describe an action either, since it functions as a modifier of the preceding noun phrase. Instead, it illustrates the content of the preceding noun phrase. Finally, also the infinitival clause in (13) and (14) cannot be considered to be describing an action. In both of the sentences it does not serve as an argument of the matrix predicate but functions as an adjunct. In (13) it expresses a prerequisite to the situation described in the matrix clause. This means

that it describes a resultant state of the performed action expressed by the infinitive. In (14) it describes an incidental situation in which the content of the matrix clause is realized. Then, the process by which the action expressed by the infinitive is performed is not central to the meaning conveyed in the sentence.

All these observations make it clear that, in the sentences or the clauses where the object is marked in the nominative case, what is described is not the process by which the action expressed by the predicate is performed. Then, the object in question cannot be regarded as a full-fledged undergoer participant. On the contrary, a state is more or less central to the meaning conveyed in these sentences or clauses. Since both the existential sentence and the possessive construction are describing a state, and their theme argument is marked in the nominative case, it seems reasonable to suppose that the object marked in the nominative case also functions as the theme argument.

3. Primary participant

In my previous papers(1999, 2001), I have called the object marked in the nominative case the primary participant. It is not altogether wrong to do so, since the subject serving as the primary participant does not appear in the sentences or the clauses in which the object in question is involved. Moreover, if a state is the focus of the description, we have good reason to take the object, rather than the subject, as the primary participant.

It is important to note, however, that there is a difference between the subject and the object marked in the nominative case. That is, only the object alternates between the nominative case and the partitive case in agreement with the quantitative property of its referent. When the referent of the object is indefinite in quantity, the object is indicated not in the nominative case but in the partitive case. The following serves as an example:

(16) *Sinun* *täytyy* *lukea* *kirjoja.*
 you-gen.sg. must-3.sg.pr. read-1.inf. book-part.pl.

You must read some books.

In this sentence the object is marked in the partitive case, though this is the necessary construction. This is because the referent of the object is plural and therefore indefinite in quantity. One can point out a similarity between the object marked in the nominative case and the post-verbal argument of the existential sentence and the possessive construction. That is, also the latter alternates the nominative case with the

partitive case. For example:

- (17) *Pihalla on lapsia.*
 yard-adess.sg. is-3.sg.pr. child-part.pl.

In the yard there are children. (=3)

Here, the post-verbal argument is indicated in the partitive case, since it refers to the indefinite quantity. On the other hand, the subject, the actor participant, cannot be marked in the partitive case, even when its referent is indefinite in quantity. Take the following for example:

- (18) *Opiskelijat marssivat soihtu kädessä.*
 student-nom.pl. march-3.pl.p. torch-nom.sg. hand-iness.sg.

Students marched with a torch in their hand.

These examples make it clear that the theme argument can be marked in the partitive case, while the actor participant cannot. What has to be noticed here is that the partitive case can be assigned also to the undergoer participant. For example:

- (19) *Lomalla luen kirjoja.*
 holiday-adess.sg. read-1.sg.pr. book-part.pl.

During holidays I read some books.

Compare this sentence with the sentence (16) above. There is no reason to deny that the argument in the partitive case in (19) is the undergoer participant. Therefore, arguments that receive a case through the non-lexical case assignment can be marked in the partitive case, unless it functions as the actor participant. If this is the case, the concept of the primary participant is not sufficient to describe the non-lexical case assignment in the Finnish language.

The partitive case is assigned to the theme argument and the undergoer participant when they are partially involved in the unbounded situation described in the sentence or the clause in question. According to Leino(1991), I define a bounded situation as follows: if some limit has been put on the activity or the state of affairs, it is a bounded situation³⁹. To put it the other way round, in an unbounded situation there is not any limit. If the situation described in a sentence is bounded, its arguments are totally involved in that situation. Then, it is possible to say that an argument is partially involved in the situation, if the situation is unbounded. What should be noticed here is, however, that not all arguments are partially involved when the sentence describes an unbounded situation. The actor participant is always totally involved, whether or not the situation is bounded. Then, the partitive case cannot be

assigned to the actor participant.

It is interesting to note that the subject can be indicated in the partitive case when it appears after the predicate. The following provides an example. That is:

(20) *Pihalla leikkii lapsia.*

yard-adess.sg. play-3.sg.pr. child-part.pl.

In the yard children are playing.

In this sentence the subject is indeed marked in the partitive case. However, if the assumption that the partitive case cannot be assigned to the actor participant holds good, how can the partitive marking be explained? The point to observe is that the subject in (20) has some property common to the post-verbal noun phrase of the existential sentence and the possessive construction. That is to say, both the referent of the subject in (20) and that of the post-verbal noun phrase in (17) are not the entity already known but are the entity newly introduced to the discourse. In other words, sentences whose subject appears after the predicate convey the same kind of pragmatic information as the existential sentence and the possessive construction. If this is a valid argument, it is fair to say that the subject in (20) serves as the theme argument rather than the actor participant, since the post-verbal noun phrase of the existential sentence and the possessive construction is the theme argument.

It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that the object is marked in the nominative case because it functions as the theme argument. The theme argument can sometimes be the subject and sometimes be the object. It can also be neither the subject nor the object, like the post-verbal argument of the existential sentence and the possessive construction. Anyway, the theme argument appears in the circumstances where the distinction between the actor participant and the undergoer participant is neutralized. Then, the object cannot be the theme argument when the subject functioning as a full-fledged actor participant is overtly expressed. In the same way, the subject cannot serve as the theme argument if the predicate is transitive.

4. Concluding remarks

Let me summarize the main points that have been made in this paper. The distinction between the actor participant and the undergoer participant is valid for explaining the non-lexical case assignment of the Finnish language. A simple diagram like the following, however, cannot capture the facts about the non-lexical case assignment. That is:

(21)

Actor	Undergoer
Subject	Object
NOMINATIVE	GENITIVE

In the Finnish language, also the theme argument receives a case through the non-lexical case assignment. The nominative case cannot be assigned to the undergoer participant, and the partitive case cannot be assigned to the actor participant. Since the theme argument is neither the actor participant nor the undergoer participant, both the nominative case and the partitive case are available to mark the theme argument. On the other hand, the genitive case is assigned only to the undergoer participant. As we have seen with reference to the sentences (9) and (15), the subject is sometimes indicated in the genitive case indeed, but the genitive marking of the subject is confined to the subject of non-finite predicates. Non-finite predicates are nominal forms of predicate verbs, and their nominal character can account for the genitive marking of their subject. The semantic subject of nominal elements is generally indicated in the genitive case, as can be seen from the following example. That is:

(22) *koneen tulo*
 plane-gen.sg. arrival-nom.sg.
 the arrival of the plane

Thus, the genitive marking of the subject is quite different in nature from that of the object.

We can now represent the non-lexical case assignment in the Finnish language diagrammatically as follows:

(23)

Actor	Theme	Undergoer
Subject		Object
	Non-Subject & Non-Object	
NOMINATIVE ⁴⁾	NOMINATIVE	GENITIVE ⁵⁾
	PARTITIVE	PARTITIVE

Notes

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1) According to the traditional grammar, the morphological case assigned to the object

in the singular is called the accusative. The so-called accusative case is, however, identical in form with the genitive case in the singular and with the nominative case in the plural. Only the personal pronouns have a distinct accusative form. Then, in this paper, I don't use the term 'accusative' as to nominals other than the personal pronouns.

2) 'SK87' means that this example is drawn from the corpus made up of the texts of all the issues in 1987 of the weekly magazine *Suomen kuvalehti*. The numbers after the colon indicate the number of the issue and the sentence number in the issue respectively.

3) On the notion of boundedness, see also Heinämäki(1984) and Sakuma(2000).

4) When the predicate is non-finite, the nominative alternates with the genitive case.

5) The genitive alternates with the nominative when the argument in question is in the plural, and with the accusative when the argument in question is one of the personal pronouns. However, the nominative marking of the plural object is highly exceptional. Since the referent of the plural object is usually indefinite in quantity, it is usual that the plural object is indicated in the partitive case. It can be marked in the nominative case only when its referent is extremely definite. The following provides an example:

i) *Luin nämä kaikki kirjat loppuun.*
 read-1.sg.p. this-nom.pl. all book-nom.pl. end-illat.sg.
 I read these all books to the end.

Abbreviations

sg.-singular	pl.-plural	nom.-nominative
gen.-genitive	part.-partitive	iness.-inessive
illat.-illative	adess.-adessive	instruct.-instructive
pr.-present	p.-past	pass.-passive
imp.-imperative	inf.-infinitive	p.p.-past participle

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