

Re: On case: (was Re: Learning a language)

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2004-06/2026.html>

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Date: 06/22/04

Date: Tue, 22 Jun 2004 13:48:53 +0300

In article <ia5ed0p20stmvs1fojh3dq3gb3vgji0gj7@4ax.com>, Ruud Harmsen <realemailseesite01@rudhar.com> wrote:

- > *Mon, 21 Jun 2004 19:15:48 +0300: holman@elo.helsinki.fi (Eugene*
- > *Holman): in sci.lang:*
- >
- > *[a long and interesting explanation of cases in Finnish and Hungarian]*
- >
- > *OK, you convinced me that Hungarian and Finnish have cases too. So*
- > *I'll modify my statements:*

Thank you for conceding this point.

- >
- > *1) The fact that Hungarian has something like 4 times as many cases as*
- > *Russian, doesn't mean it is necessarily 4 times as difficult to learn*
- > *as Russian. I[t] may even be easier.*

Perhaps. The number of cases is not the issue, rather it is the systematicity of the grammar. The Russian case system interacts with systems of gender and declensional type, for which reason the same ending can have different functions (e.g. –u as in *knigu*, accusative singular of the feminine –a stem *kniga* 'book', but also in *mal'chiku*, dative singular of the masculine non-palatalized consonant stem *mal'chik* 'boy' as well as in *chayu*, the partitive genitive of *chay* 'tea'), and the same function can be designated by different endings (e.g. *knig* genitive plural (zero ending) of *kniga*, *dverej*, genitive plural of the feminine palatalized consonant stem *dver'* 'door', *volkov* genitive plural of the masculine non-palatalized consonant stem *volk* 'wolf'). Additionally, many of the endings are syncretosemic: when added to a feminine a-stem the ending –u denotes both accusativeness and singularity; when added to a masculine non-palatalized consonant stem it designates both dativeness and singularity. The corresponding plural forms are *knigam* and *mal'chikam*, with the ending –am denoting dativeness and plurality.

In Hungarian the mapping between the form and content of case endings is far more straightforward, and the only interaction between the stem and the ending is limited to vowel harmony and, in some cases, assimilation at

the morpheme boundary. Hungarian case endings tend to be phonologically heavier than the case endings in Russian, they do not interact with gender or declensional type, and they are halosemic: their sole function is to indicate case relations. Other grammatical categories such as number do not interact with them:

Singular Plural család 'family'

Nominative család családok
Accusative családot családokat
Illative családba családokba
Inessive családban családokban
Elicative családból családokból
Sublative családra családokra
Superessive családon családokon
Delative családról családokról
Allative családhoz családokhoz
Adessive családnál családoknál
Ablative családtól családoktól
Dative családnak családoknak
Instrumental családdal családokkal
Translative családdá családokká
Causal-final családért családokért
Essive-formal családként családokként
Terminative családig családokig
Distributive családoként –
Sociative családostul –

This basic pattern is invariable for all nouns, but the form of the stem (ló 'horse' ~ lavak 'horses', híd 'bridge' ~ hidak 'bridges'), the linking vowel (család 'family' ~ családok 'families', but híd 'bridge' ~ hidak 'bridges'), vowel harmony (családban 'in the family': cseszében 'in the cup' < cszesze 'cup'), and the initial consonant of the ending for some cases (e.g. the assimilation of the initial consonant of the endings of the Instrumental and Translative in the above paradigm), mean that producing and interpreting the cases is not a simple matter of concatenation or deconcatenation.

>

> 2) *I'd rather learn Hungarian than Russian, because the latter seems easier to me (and more interesting). (So far I haven't learned either languages, but I made some attempts).*

Russian is probably "easier" from your perspective because it is an Indo-European language. The Russian case system has roughly the same grammatical functions that the case systems have in Latin and German, and it interacts with systems of gender and declensional type to produce the same type of complex and frustrating synchthetosemia that it does in those two languages.

Hungarian being a non-Indo-European language, its case system has some functions and meanings that take considerable getting used to for a

speaker of a (European) Indo-European language. In particular, the Hungarian case system commits you to a very precise and systematic analysis of concrete and abstract reality in terms of comings, stayings, and departures involving penetrations and contacts, with entities and surfaces. The meanings and functions of the Hungarian cases are generally more concrete than those of Russian (owing to the fact that some Russian cases represent the merger and continuation of what were once more than one case at an earlier stage in the language), and their morphological markers are heftier, but they are still more abstract than those of adpositions. Indeed, the Hungarian case system is complemented by a large inventory of more precise postpositions which, like their counterparts in Finnish, co-occur with nouns in specific cases and can also be inflected for case and person:

elé '(to) in front of' eló't '(at) in front of' eló'l 'from in front of'
(cf. Finnish eteen, edessä, edestä)

alá '(to) under' alatt '(at) under' alól 'from under'
(cf. Finnish alle, alla, alta)

alám '(to) beneath me' (cf. Finnish alleni)
alattam '(at) beneath me' (cf. Finnish allani)
alólam 'from beneath me' (cf. Finnish altani)

alád '(to) beneath you' (cf. Finnish allasi)
alattad 'beneath you' (cf. Finnish allasi)
alólad 'from beneath you' (cf. Finnish altasi)

The Hungarian case endings, like those of Finnish, Estonian, Turkish, and Mongolian are overwhelmingly haplosemic, nor do they interact with systems of gender or, for the most part, noun declension. Most of the morphophonemic variation observed in the case markers of these languages is a consequence of quite automatic interaction between word stem and marker such as vowel harmony and assimilation. An extreme example is provided by the Finnish illative case, the marker of which is an algorithm that can produce more than twenty distinct forms, depending on the phonological shape of the noun to which it is attached: maa 'country' > maahan, tie 'road' > tiehen, pii 'flint' > piihin, suo 'swamp' > suohon, suu 'mouth' > suuhun, syy 'reason' > syyhin, pää 'head' > päähän, yö 'night' > yöhön; kala 'fish' > kalaan, nukke 'doll' > nukkeen, leike 'cutlet' > leikkeeseen, nuoli 'arrow' > nuoleen, tuoli 'chair' > tuoliin, talo 'house' > taloon, kalu 'tool' > kaluun, äly 'intelligence' > älyyn, isä 'father' > isään, pöllö 'owl' > pöllöön; talot 'houses' > taloihin, leikkeet 'cutlets' > leikkeisiin, hevonen 'horse' > hevoseen, hevoset 'horses' > hevosiin.

Regards,
Eugene Holman