

TITLE: Warlpiri type languages and accusative case?

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ABSTRACT:

Very much in the spirit of Goddard (1982), Julie Legate argues in a more recent article (Legate 2008) for a distinction in languages such as Warlpiri between a syntactic or abstract nominative and accusative case assignment as opposed to morphological case assignment, although this distinction is only morphologically realized on bound pronouns. Thus the ergative marking of non-enclitic subject NPs is an exponent of ergative morphological case to a constituent that is assigned syntactic nominative case. No morphological case is marked on syntactically nominative intransitive subjects and accusative direct object NPs. Thus, in an approach similar to that of Simpson (1991) who argues for the "default" status of absolutive case, Legate argues that there is no absolutive case, either at the syntactic or morphological levels, it is merely the "default morphological realization of abstract Case features, used when no realization of the specific Case feature is available" (Legate 2008:55).

Here I want to take a closer look at the nature of accusative case in Warlpiri and similar languages, and at some of the evidence that Legate proposes in favour of its assignment to non-enclitic object phrases. I will argue that unlike most European languages (and many others) where it can be shown that accusative case is assigned by the lexical verb in active voice clauses whether finite or non-finite, the Warlpiri verb fails to assign accusative case. The evidence from non-finite clauses is most compelling, as I've previously sought to show (Laughren 1989, 1992). The assignment of accusative case in finite clauses must then depend on some inflectional properties of the clause, as is typically argued for nominative case assignment. This paper aims to identify those properties and in so doing draws on the comparison between two closely related Tangkic languages, Yukulta and Kayadilt, which differ in both case-marking and inflectional categories. It also reopens the question as to whether accusative case is assigned to non-enclitic pronouns in Warlpiri and to the status of syntactic as opposed to morphological case. Is abstract case merely a mirror of particular syntactic or structural relationships; if so do we need it as a distinct module in a syntactic representation?

References:

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