

What the structural/inherent case distinction can tell us about the implementation of dependent case

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The past decades of theoretical and empirical work have turned up a number of problems with standard Case theory, at least as a theory of morphological case. A series of distinct alternative views have been proposed, leading to a state of affairs where there is strong and fundamental disagreement within Minimalism over how morphological case and its distribution should be modeled. In this talk I will consider two such views. On the one hand is the idea that case is morphological, assigned based on the structure output by the narrow syntax, but too late to affect the narrow syntactic derivation itself. On the other is the idea that cases are not just features on N or D, but represent their own substantive syntactic projections. These approaches would seem to be mutually incompatible, but I will explore the idea that the best theory of morphological case would incorporate both. The strategy is to map them onto the traditional divide between structural and inherent cases. Doing so is by no means straightforward, requiring modifications to both approaches. Furthermore, it requires us to confront important questions about the implementation of dependent case that have received surprisingly little attention until now. The result will be a somewhat unorthodox proposal, which I will however argue comes with considerable payoffs. Long-standing problems with each approach are addressed by the complementary strengths of the other, and the resulting theory of the structural-inherent distinction can account for the well-known empirical differences between the two in a far more principled way than previous approaches. We also end up with a way to accommodate a series of pesky phenomena that straddle the structural/inherent divide, and the resulting approach can be used to gain a novel perspective on certain well-established comparative and diachronic patterns in morphological case systems.