

# Cyclical Change in Agreement and Case

Elly van GELDEREN  
Arizona State University, USA

## ABSTRACT

In this talk, I will look at a number of instances of morphosyntactic change having to do with Case and agreement, i.e. head and dependent marking. I will then show there is a systematic pattern to all of them, and look for an explanation to these patterns from the language acquisition device.

Changes in head-marking (or agreement) can be captured by means of a cycle from a full phrase to a head to an agreement marker. In this paper, I give examples of stages in the cycle from Indo-European, Japanese, Austronesian, Athabaskan, Uto-Aztecan, Oto-Mangan, and Bantu. Emphatic (non-argument) pronouns can be reanalyzed as subject pronouns, which in turn can be reanalyzed as agreement and later be lost. I refer to this series of changes as the Subject Agreement Cycle or Subject Cycle. Subject agreement is frequent, as Bybee's (1985) estimate of 56% agreement with the subject shows and Siewierska's (2008) of 70%. Subjects aren't the only arguments involved in this kind of a cycle; object pronouns can also become agreement markers, and I provide examples, again from Uto-Aztecan, Japanese, Indo-European, Athabaskan, Austronesian, and Bantu.

The explanation for an agreement cycle can be seen in terms of phrase to head, and of interpretable to uninterpretable features in current Minimalist thinking. I formulate these as Economy Principles that are part of the linguistic endowment, possibly a 'third factor' principle.

I will also investigate the other major kind of marking, namely that on the nominal. Cycles are much less obvious here because there are so many functions. Dependent marking on a nominal is often referred to as Case, and Case can be (a) grammatical (marking the subject and object), or (b) discourse related (marking in/definiteness), or (c) semantic (marking the thematic relations). Marking the thematic positions is done through pure position (in e.g. Chinese, English), or through inherent Case and adpositions (in e.g. Sanskrit, Latin, Malayalam, Japanese, Tagalog). Definiteness and specificity are the second semantic aspect that needs to be marked. Specificity/definiteness can be marked through case in e.g. Finnish, Turkish, Persian, and Limbu (van Driem, 1986: 34), through aspect in e.g. Russian (Leiss, 1994; 2000; Abraham, 1997; Philippi, 1997), through position in e.g. Chinese, through a determiner, and through a combination of position and articles in e.g. Dutch and German (Diesing, 1991).

Unlike the agreement cycle, where the source is typically a pronoun or determiner, dependent marking has no unique source and is much messier. In this paper, I identify a few sources and attempt to account for them in a Minimalist way. I illustrate that semantic/inherent Case typically reanalyzes verbs, nouns, and adverbs, and that structural Case reanalyzes a D (for the 'nominative') or an ASP (for the 'accusative'). Using a Pesetsky and Torrego (e.g. 2004) type account, I argue that the D (in languages that mark structural Case) has uninterpretable features valued by T and ASP respectively.