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Uralic localism in a discourse perspective : a comparison of Local Cases in Samic and Finnic languages

Deixis, especially spatial deixis, is rich in the Uralic languages, morphologically richer in the Finnic than in the Samic languages thanks to their large number of case suffixes (among which 3 internal and 3 external local cases): Finnish and Estonian can thus be called “spatial languages by structure”. But space is omnipresent in Sami culture, traditionally a culture of nomads, and the expression of spatio-temporal deixis is in oral Northern Sami (henceforth “Sami”) quite complex: only two local suffixes (Locative-separative LS, and Directive D), but also prepositions, postpositions, lexemes (with varying degrees of grammaticalization), numerous adverbs. Anchored in the environment – localization can even be the sole criterion for individual identification in traditional society – , the semantic variations are mostly induced by the functional character of localizing: for reindeer breeders, the vertical dimension will be unmarked, for fishermen it will be a horizontal axis.

Morphologically, the two FU language branches illustrate thus 2 opposite evolutions of case systems : 1/ Languages generally get large case systems through the elaboration of the local cases – see the Finnish language. 2/ The cases, if numerous, have a tendency to syncretize – see modern (Northern) Sami, where there are 2 mergers, among grammatical (accusative-genitive AG) and local cases (LS < inessive and elative). A third usual tendency – the semantic cases, especially local cases, expand their territory through covering syntactic relations and covering thereby grammatical cases (Lehmann 1982) – seems to concern directly the Partitive, a pivot-case of the Finnic system, which has disappeared in Sami : « officially » S and A are expressed exclusively by Nominative and AG. We shall question this official version of grammars, and try to validate a localist interpretation of the Samic and Finnic cases systems, hypothesizing that not only it is difficult to maintain a strict distinction between core grammatical cases and semantic cases, but that a realistic vision implies to include the local cases in the grammatical system of both languages.

Starting from the concrete (local and temporal) meanings of the D (destination), and its exact counterpart LS, we shall study some of the meanings involved by the use of these cases with an animate being, e.g. LS in the “habitive” construction (*Máhte-s leat ođđa sabehat* “Matthew has new skis”), and as the source of reception / getting / asking (*Dan mun lean gullan Máhte-s* “I learned that from Matthew”). In complete agreement with Blake’s conclusion that “Case is a system for marking dependent nouns for the type of relationship they bear to their heads (...) but it marks both relationships of propositional content and of discourse-pragmatic viewpoint (2001:183), we shall be interested of :

1/semantic-syntactically, the verbs the local rection of which is differently oriented in Sami and Finnish (Sa. *liikot* + D ≠ Fi. *pitää* + elative “to like”; Sa. *Diet ášši ii guoskka munnje* (D) ≠ Fi. *Tuo asia ei koske minu-a* (Partitive) “That thing does not touch me [is none of my concern]”; Sa. *Várut beatnagi-s!* (LS) ≠ Fi. *Varo koira!* (Acc. Ø) “Beware of the dog!”

2/ pragmatically, the situations when LS encroaches further upon the expression of possession—usually rendered by the genitive (*Ádjá fanas lea ođas* “Grandfather’s boat is new”)—when one wishes to highlight through fronting the person or object possessed: *Oidnetgo don ádjá-s dan ođđa fatnasa?* “Have you seen grandfather’s new boat?”; *Ádjá-s dat ođđa fanas lea juo ráigánan* “Grandfather’s new boat already has a hole in it” (lit. “To Grandfather the new boat already has...”); *Duon nissoni-s dat nieida lea fárren Ru#ii* “That woman’s daughter has gone to Sweden” (lit. “For that woman, the daughter has gone to Sweden”). This strategy of information structuring, equivalent to oral topicalizing devices in other languages (English “As for that woman, her daughter...”), suggests another type of case hierarchy than the usually referred to: concrete local cases are cognitively more salient than grammatical ones.

In order to problematize further these partly equivalent uses of local cases in related languages, and show the necessity to refer them to their discourse context, we have collected the occurrences of local cases in Sami and Finnish, with some incursions into other Samic and Finnic languages (where the mergers can be different) from a textual corpus of both narratives and dialogues. The diversity of factors which contribute towards the choice of the cases, in particular the interaction of syntactic and semantic features of the verbs, combined with enunciative and situational criteria, can be analyzed in terms of cognitive processes underlying the grammatical vs. «local» constructions. The role of the local cases for the information structuring of the sentence and discourse will be apprehended through the variations of parallel translations in the different languages: fictive dialogues (legends, novels, theater) and how the translator 1/ transfers a selection of the combined features of local cases into a language lacking the suffixed internal/external difference, or, on the contrary, 2/ makes explicit with the internal/external difference a specificity which was only latent in the other language, 3/ tries to reconstruct a difference of marked topicality when a further step of grammaticalization has neutralized it.

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