

The inventory of the Uralic cases

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Uralic languages are typically characterized by rich case systems with approximately 10 members, and many have case systems of approximately 15 or 20 cases. According to Iggesen (2007), there are 24 languages with more than 10 cases; five of those listed are Uralic (Erzya Mordvin, Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, and Udmurt).ⁱ

Across sources, one can find lists that state the number of cases. Erzya Mordvin has 12 and Moksha Mordvin 13 cases (Zaicz 1998: 192-194), Udmurt 16 cases (Riese 1998: 268), Komi has 18 cases (Riese 1998: 268), Komi Permyak has 17 cases (Lytkin et al. 1962: 184), Tundra Nenets 7 (Salminen 1998: 537), Kamas 7 (Szimoncsics 1998: 586), Nganasan 8-11 (Helimski 1998: 496), Selkup 13 (Helimski 1998: 560-561). However, the criteria applied for casehood differ across Uralic sources, and it is always worthwhile clarifying them before citing the number of cases for each language. Here is a list to consider concerning the possible reasons for reaching a different result in each particular language.

Productivity

One of the differences concerns productivity, most accounts do not include the nonproductive cases such as vocative. Other sources explicitly state the status of the cases in terms of their productivity. For instance, Võro is described as having 13 productive and 3 nonproductive cases (Iva 2007: 41), Eastern Mari with 8 productive and 3 nonproductive cases (Kangasmaa-Minn 1998: 226). However, others don't; moreover, the criteria for 'productive' may vary as well.

Grammatical analysis

Grammatical analysis matters as well, since the distinction between clitics, inflection, derivation, and postpositions is not uniformly treated. Veps with its various recently agglutinated postpositional cases is a challenging example (Grünthal 2005, Tikka 1992), and it has been argued that most of the Hungarian 18 cases are rather postpositions or adverbs (Kiefer 1987, Spencer 2008, Surányi 2009, de Groot 2009). In most instances, several factors combine, as in Votic or Veps. The Votic dialect reported by Tsvetkov (2008:27) has an inventory identical to that of Estonian, consisting of 14 cases; the additional unproductive exessive and instructive, and the accusative object case are recorded in the dialect studied by Ariste (Ariste 1968: 17).

Case syncretism

Variation in registering the number of cases occurs due to case syncretism. Many languages, especially the Finnic ones, have an object case that may be referred to as "accusative" in the system, but they have no clear morphological accusative formant in the present-day variants; therefore, the Finnic cases are typically treated differently. The variation of the number of cases in the Sámi languages is due to this factor. Sami languages are described having systems with 6-9 cases (Inari, Pite, Skolt Sámi 9 or 8, Southern Sámi 8 or 7, Lule Sámi 7, Northern Sami 7 or 6 (Wikipedia).

Dialect chosen

The number of cases varies considerably in the dialects of Khanty (3-11, including the fact that the alignment system has variants, e.g. the Khanty Vakh dialect has an ergative-accusative alignment) and Mansi (6-7) (Honti 1998: 343) and some sources do not state the exact dialect.

Official variant chosen

Political minority status may result in a different number of cases in one language; for instance, Meänkieli has two cases less than Standard Finnish, which has 15 cases (VISK § 81).

Diachronic perspectives

Since the Uralic languages are changing, their case systems are changing as well. Some cases disappear or become non-productive, postpositions may develop into cases.

This talk presents the inventory of the Uralic cases, combined with an overview of the results of the workshop.

ⁱ The following languages have more than 10 cases in WAL: Awa Pit, Basque, Brahui, Chukchi, Epena Pedee, Estonian, Evenki, Finnish, Gooniyandi, Hamtai, Hungarian, Hunzib, Ingush, Kayardild, Ket, Lak, Lezgian, Martuthunira, Mordvin (Erzya), Nez Perce, Nunggubuyu, Pitjantjatjara, Toda, Udmurt (Iggesen 2008).