

Uralic case: introduction to the workshop

Seppo Kittilä
General Linguistics
University of Helsinki
kittila@mappi.helsinki.fi

Uralic cases are well known for their rich case inventories. Some Uralic languages, such as Hungarian and Veps, have been reported to have more than 20 cases, which is a very high number from a cross-linguistic perspective. Even languages with fewer cases (such as Saami languages) have nearly 10 cases (which is also a high number typologically). Languages with rich case inventories are especially interesting for studies of case, since they provide us with better insights into the functions of case. For example, what kinds of case are possible, which are common, which cases are rare and which are the functions that are rather expressed by adpositions. Many of the cases attested in languages with rich case inventories are so-called semantic cases, while languages with fewer cases ‘focus’ on grammatical cases. The former are more interesting as regards the possible functions of cases, functions expressed by grammatical cases display less variation (they are restricted to core semantic roles such as agent, patient and recipient).

Since case is something Uralic languages can be said to be famous for, it does not come as a surprise that case is a commonly studied feature of Uralic languages. There are numerous studies dealing with individual cases, either in a single language (e.g. genitive in Finnish) or in the whole language family (e.g. abessive in Uralic languages), in addition to which the case systems of the languages have also been studied (e.g. development of cases in Uralic languages). However, one of the problems of these studies is their idiosyncratic nature. Many of the studies of Uralic cases have been conducted within the framework of Uralic linguistics (and also written in languages not generally known by the scientific community), and the studies are thus not accessible to scholars working on case from a more general (e.g. typological-functional) perspective. One of the goals of this workshop is to change this by providing a discussion forum for all scholars interested in Uralic case irrespective of their background.

In my talk, I will give a very short introduction to case, especially case in Uralic languages. I start by briefly discussing case from a theoretical point of view. In other words, I will discuss some definitions of case and some of the characteristic features of case in general. This will be followed by a short discussion of some of the recent studies of Uralic case. The nature of my talk is very introductory, since individual cases will be discussed in the talks that follow.