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#### Are single-term case systems possible?

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# Roadmap

- 1. The received view of case systems
- 2. Revising structuralist assumptions
- 3. Two-term vs. one-term case systems
- 4. Extensions and implications

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- A minimal case inventory consists of two members.
- For a language to have just one case is logically equivalent to having no case at all.

- This view obviously stems from the structuralist conception of grammatical features as instantiating oppositions (e.g. Jakobson 1936).
- An opposition by definition presupposes at least two members.
- Hence, if case is a grammatical feature, it by definition must consist of at least two values.



Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965):

"Le système le plus simple que l'on puisse concevoir est le système à deux termes." (Hjelmslev 1972/1935: 113)



Igor Mel'čuk (2006: 119):

"[B]y postulating one case in a language, we automatically create a second case which has to embrace all the nominal forms not covered by the first case".

"This is so because an inflectional category cannot contain fewer than two elements".

• This view remains mainstream in post-structuralist functional-typological approaches to case as well.

- This view remains mainstream in post-structuralist functional-typological approaches to case as well.
- Blake (2000/1994: 155): "Morphological case systems range from two members to a dozen or so".
- Bickel & Nichols (2007: 210): "Case inventories range from two cases to dozens".
- Malchukov & Spencer (2009: 651): "The size of case systems vary dramatically, from the minimal (two case) systems ..., to the large inventories exemplified by Daghestanian..."

THE WORLD ATLAS OF LANGUAGE STRUCTURES

EDITED IN MARTIN HASPELMATH MATTHEW S. DRYER DAVID GIL AND BERNARD COMRIE



Oxford

lggesen (2005: 212):

"The minimal case paradigm contains two members, since paradigmatic relationships between word-forms are ultimately based on binary oppositions."

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lggesen (2005: 212):

"The minimal case paradigm contains two members, since paradigmatic relationships between word-forms are ultimately based on binary oppositions."

- In my own earlier work (e.g. Arkadiev 2009), I also assumed without discussion that two-case systems are "minimal".
- However, it is perhaps the fact that I have investigated twocase systems that led me to put this assumption to doubt.

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 There is in fact a discrepancy between the theoretical/ typological work and descriptive practice, including that of linguists with obvious theoretical and typological background.



Foley (1991: 165):

"The Oblique suffix -*n* ~ -*nan*. This is the single nominal case marker in Yimas."



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More on Yimas later.



Danielsen (2007: 150) on the Baure (Arawakan, Bolivia) general locative marker -ye:

"It could <...> be considered a locative case marker, but there are no other core cases in Baure, so that it does not seem right to call the locative construction a kind of case".



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Is this a valid objection?

 There is growing awareness among theoretical linguists of different persuasions that grammatical features can be unary:

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- Mel'čuk (2006: 124): "quasi-grammemes", i.e. grammatical forms not participating in inflectional oppositions with other forms (e.g. the English "Saxon genitive").

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- Plungian & van der Auwera (2006: 326-333): "The discontinuous past marker may be the only marker of tense within a basically non-tensed verbal system".
- Danon (2010: 161): "[def] is a monovalent (privative) feature, where the alternation is between having a [+def] feature ... and lacking it."



#### Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics

#### Features

Greville G. Corbett

Corbett (2012: 16-17):

"[T]reating features as unary is a matter of notation"



Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics

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"[T]reating features as unary is a matter of notation"

Not quite.

• Iggesen (2005: 212) again:

The minimal case paradigm contains **two members**, since paradigmatic relationships between word-forms are ultimately based on **binary oppositions** (minimal pairs). This implies that whenever a language has an overtly marked case category expressing a specific function, a corresponding zeromarked base form is counted as a case ("default case", or "direct case") even if it has no specific function describable in *positive terms*. In such instances, *the base form receives its* case status only through the existence of a functionally and *formally marked case category*. (boldface belongs to the author, italics to me – P.A.)

• McGregor (2023: 243):

More is required to motivate any approach to case marking than a theoretical dictate. Recognition of unmarked forms of nominals as case forms and of morphological zeros requires language internal evidence.

Cf. McGregor (2003) on morphological zeros in general.



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- 1. There is no logical necessity for grammatical features to be minimally binary (see above).
- 2. Binary and unary features are not just notational variants (*pace* Corbett 2012).
- 3. Binary features should only be based on equipollent oppositions (cf. Plungian 1988).

- Privative vs. equipollent oppositions (Trubetzkoy 1969/1939, Coleman 1998: 56-57; Corbett 2012: 16n1):
- privative oppositions: presence (F) vs. absence (Ø) of a property
  equipollent opposition: one property (F) vs. a different property (G)

A possible objection:

 Isn't it the case that any binary feature can be reduced to a privative opposition between "F" and "elsewhere"?

A possible way out:

- Theoretically, a binary feature <F, G> can be recast either as <F, elsewhere> or as <G, elsewhere>.
- If the two "privative" instantiations are more or less equivalent, then neither F nor G is a clear default and hence the opposition is in fact equipollent.

- For case values to be legitimately postulated, they must be positively characterisable in terms of
  - morphological expression,
  - functional distribution,
  - or both.

- For case values to be legitimately postulated, they must be positively characterisable in terms of
  - morphological expression,
  - functional distribution,
  - or both.
- Alleged "default cases" with zero expression should not be postulated at all; such forms should be treated as caseless.
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• Two-case (bicasual) systems are those where both case values can be positively characterised in terms of their form, functional distribution, or both.

- Two-case (bicasual) systems are those where both case values can be positively characterised in terms of their form, functional distribution, or both.
- One-case (monocasual) systems are those where there is only one case value with non-zero form and non-default distribution, opposed to an elsewhere caseless form.

 Kati (Indo-European > Indo-Iranian, Afghanistan; Grjunberg 1980): a language with a two-term case system



• Kati case paradigm (Grjunberg 1980: 176)

		femi	nine	masc	uline
		ʻgirl'	'house'	'man'	'source'
Direct		juk	ати	mančī	vuncev
Obligue	Sg	juka	amuřa	manče	vunceve
Oblique	Pl	juko	amuřo	mančo	vuncevo

• Functions of cases in Kati (Grjunberg 1980: 180-181):

	direct case	oblique case
•	S/A & indefinite P in the imperfective tenses	• definite P in the imperfective tenses
•	S/P in the perfective tenses	<ul> <li>A in perfective tenses</li> </ul>
•	nominal predicate	<ul> <li>recipient</li> </ul>
•	goal and location	<ul> <li>before the possessive suffix -<i>sti</i></li> <li>complement of prepositions</li> </ul>

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- A proponent of a rigidly structuralist approach could probably argue that the Kati "Direct" case is a "default" or "elsewhere" form.
- Still, the mutual distribution of the two cases in Kati is complex enough to warrant a description in terms of an equipollent opposition.
- A system with two cases.



Chrestien de Troyes, *Perceval*. Manuscrit de Montpellier (ca. 1400). Source: wikipedia

Old French is also a language with a two-case system

• Old French case paradigms (Einhorn 1974: 15):

		masculine		feminine	
		'wall'	'baron'	'rose'	'nun'
Sg	Dir	murs	ber	rose	none
	Obl	mur	baron	rose	nonain
Pl	Dir	mur	baron	roses	nonains
	Obl	murs	barons	roses	nonains

• Old French case concord in the noun phrase (only for the masculine nouns, Einhorn 1974: 15):

		'the wall'	'the baron'
Sg	Dir	li murs	li ber
	Obl	le mur	le baron
Pl	Dir	li mur	li baron
	Obl	les murs	les barons

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- Direct case (*cas sujet*): subject (S/A) and elements in agreement or apposition to it; forms of address (vocative);
- Oblique case (*cas régime*): all other syntactic positions, i.e.
  - direct object
  - indirect object
  - adnominal possessor
  - complement of prepositions
  - certain prepositionless adjuncts

 In terms of functions, the opposition between Direct and Oblique in Old French was a privative one, with the "marked" member clearly being the Direct, as evidenced by its subsequent loss (Schøsler 1984; Detges 2009).

- In terms of functions, the opposition between Direct and Oblique in Old French was a privative one, with the "marked" member clearly being the Direct, as evidenced by its subsequent loss (Schøsler 1984; Detges 2009).
- However, on the formal side both cases must be recognised as such due to cumulation with number, allomorphy, and concord.



Languages with one-term case systems: Modern Persian

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, ms. of 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the 17<sup>th</sup> cent. © Brooklyn Museum

- The "Accusative" enclitic -(r)â in Modern Persian marks definite direct objects and some adjuncts (Lazard 1992: 74-76, 183-194):
- (1) kif=eš=râ bast
   portfolio=3SG=ACC close.PST.3SG
   'He closed his portfolio.' (Lazard 1992: 183)
- (2) zohr=râ nân=o piâz xord
   noon=ACC bread=and onions eat.PST.3SG
   'At noon, she ate bread and onions.' (Lazard 1992: 192)

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   noon=ACC bread=and onions eat.PST.3SG
   'At noon, she ate bread and onions.' (Lazard 1992: 192)
- Is the direct object of (2) in the "Nominative"?

• A putative two-term case system analysis for Persian (as in Arkadiev 2006, 2009):

	form	function
Dir ("Nom")	Ø	default
Obl ("Acc")	-(r)â	definite P, certain adjuncts

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 Case values like the alleged Persian "Nominative" are vacuous and are ruled out by the principles outlined above.

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- Case values like the alleged Persian "Nominative" are vacuous and are ruled out by the principles outlined above.
- There is only one case (if at all) in Persian, the "Accusative".



Languages with one-term case systems: Harar Oromo (Cushitic, Ethiopia)

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• Harar Oromo case paradigm (Owens 1985: 100-102):

Absolutive	Nominative	Gloss
sárée	sárée-n	'dog'
d'iigá	d'iiyn-níi	'blood'
duresá	dures-íi	'rich'
dubrá	dubar-tíi	ʻgirl'
bishaan	bisháan	'water'

- Harar Oromo Nominative case concord in the noun phrase (Owens 1985: 87):
- (3) nam-níi gaaríi-n ní-d'ufe men-NOM good-NOM FOC-come.PST 'Good men came.'

(4) namá gaaríi arke men good see.PST 'He saw good men.'

• Harar Oromo case functions (Owens 1985: 98-102):

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- Nom: subject (S/A)
- Abs: all other syntactic functions:
  - predicate nominal;
  - direct object;
  - causee in causative constructions;
  - adnominal possessor;
  - goal and location;
  - temporal adverbials;
  - unit of measure;
  - object of postpositions and phrase-final enclitics

• Harar Oromo case system:

	form	function
Nominative	various markers	subject
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- There is only one case in Harar Oromo, the Nominative.



Languages with one-term case systems: Yimas (Lower Sepik-Ramu, Papua New Guinea)

Yimas case system (Foley 1991: 165):

"The Oblique suffix *-n* ~ *-nan*."

This is the single nominal case marker in Yimas."

Is there a "Direct case" in Yimas (cf. again Arkadiev 2009)?
• Yimas case paradigm (Foley 1991: 166-169):

Base	Oblique	Gloss
kaŋk	kaŋk-ɲan	'shell' (PI)
tanp	tanp-n	'bone' (Sg)
tanpat	tanpat-n	'bones' (PI)
tmat	tmat-ɲan	'sun/day' (Sg)
yan	yan-an	'tree' (Sg)

• Functionally, the Yimas Oblique appears to be a default case.

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- location (Foley 1991: 165)
- (5) tnumut-nan ama-na-irm-n
  sago\_palms-OBL 1SG.S-ASP-stand-PRS
  'I am standing at the two sago palms.'

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  'I am standing at the two sago palms.'
- time (Foley 1991: 169)
- (6) tmat-nan nma-kay-wark-wat day-OBL house-1PL.A-build-HAB
   'We always build a house during the day.'

- Functionally, the Yimas Oblique appears to be a default case.
- instrument (Foley 1991: 165)
- (7) tktntrm-nan namarawt na-ŋa-tpul chair.DU-OBL person 3SG.A-1SG.O-hit
   'The person hit me with two chairs.'

- Functionally, the Yimas Oblique appears to be a default case.
- instrument (Foley 1991: 165)
- (7) tktntrm-nan namarawt na-ŋa-tpul chair.DU-OBL person 3SG.A-1SG.O-hit
   'The person hit me with two chairs.'
- complement of a postposition (Foley 1991: 172)
- (8) kawŋk-un akpŋan na-na-irm-n wall-OBL behind 3SG.S-ASP-stand-PRS
   'He is standing behind the wall.'

• The "Direct case" form is used for the core nominals crossreferenced by bound pronominal markers on the verb.

- The "Direct case" form is used for the core nominals crossreferenced by bound pronominal markers on the verb.
- S of an intransitive verb (Foley 1986: 94)
- (9) narman na-pu-t woman 3SG-go-PRF 'The woman went.'

- The "Direct case" form is used for the core nominals crossreferenced by bound pronominal markers on the verb.
- A and P of a monotransitive verb (Foley 1986: 94)

(10) narman urank ki-n-am-it woman coconut 3SG.O-3SG.A-eat-PRF 'The woman ate the coconut.'

- The "Direct case" form is used for the core nominals crossreferenced by bound pronominal markers on the verb.
- A, T and R of ditransitive verbs (Foley 1986: 94)

(11) namat urank narman ki-n-na-r-umpun man.PL coconut woman 3SG.O-3SG.A-give-PRF-3PL.R 'The woman gave the coconut to the men.'

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- The "Direct case" form is used for the core nominals crossreferenced by bound pronominal markers on the verb.
- All other syntactic positions require overt flagging by the Oblique case.
- Overt cross-reference and overt case-marking are in complementary distribution in Yimas.

 Alternations between quasi-synonymous constructions where the inanimate cause is construed either as peripheral (with Oblique flagging and no indexing) or as core (with indexing but no flagging), Foley (1991: 299-300):

- Alternations between quasi-synonymous constructions where the inanimate cause is construed either as peripheral (with Oblique flagging and no indexing) or as core (with indexing but no flagging), Foley (1991: 299-300):
- (12) a. *ikn-an antki ya-urkpwica-t* smoke-OBL thatch.PL 3PI.S-blacken-PRF 'The roof got blackened from the smoke.'
  - b. ikn antki ya-n-tal-urkpwica-t smoke thatch.PL 3PL.O-3SG.A-CAUS-blacken-PRF 'Smoke blackened the roof.'

• Should the unmarked forms of Yimas nouns that appear in core positions and are indexed on the verb be assigned a case value (e.g. "Direct")?

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- Not really.

- Should the unmarked forms of Yimas nouns that appear in core positions and are indexed on the verb be assigned a case value (e.g. "Direct")?
- Not really.
- In languages with a complementary distribution of dependent-marking and head-marking, these grammatical mechanisms can be considered as fulfilling a common function, i.e. identification of clausal participants, and essentially realising a uniform system (cf. Kibrik 2012).



"This is the Papuan case marking schema boiled down to its essence: verbal affixation for the core participants and nominal case for the peripheral ones" (Foley 1986: 96).



"This is the Papuan case marking schema boiled down to its essence: verbal affixation for the core participants and nominal case for the peripheral ones" (Foley 1986: 96).

The putative Yimas "Direct case" is purely superfluous, and it is no surprise that Foley did not postulate it.

- Interim summary:
- One-term case systems are possible and can be distinguished from two-term case systems on empirical and conceptual grounds, not just as notational variants.

- Interim summary:
- One-term case systems are possible and can be distinguished from two-term case systems on empirical and conceptual grounds, not just as notational variants.
- Moreover, two subtypes of one-case systems emerge:
  - formally marked case with a well-defined set of functions vs. unmarked default form (Persian, Oromo, also Baure);
  - formally marked default case for peripheral roles vs. unmarked form for core roles indexed on the verb (Yimas, also Cayuvava).

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• One-term case systems are those where a single "real" case is opposed to a default "caseless" form.

- One-term case systems are those where a single "real" case is opposed to a default "caseless" form.
- In fact, nothing hinges on the number of "real" cases in the system, and one can look at larger case systems and ask whether those can have "spurious" case values as well.



Ket (Yeniseyan, Central Siberia)

• Ket case system (Georg 2007: 103-104):

	Sg Masculine	Sg Feminine	Pl animate	Pl inanimate
Nominative	Ø			
Genitive	-da	-di	-na	-di
Dative	-daŋa	-diŋa	-пађа	-diŋa
Benefactive	-data	-dita	-nata	-dita
Ablative	-daŋal	-diŋal	-naŋal	-diŋal
Adessive	-daŋta	-diŋta	-naŋta	-diŋta
Locative	n/a	-ka	n/a	-ka
Prosecutive	-bes			
Instrumental	- <i>as</i>			
Abessive	-an			
Translative	<i>-esaŋ</i> 99			

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Prosecutive	-bes			
Instrumental	-as			
Abessive	-an			
Translative	<i>-esaŋ</i> 100			

- The Ket "Nominative" mostly occurs on core arguments cross-referenced in the verb:
- (13) ām dílgàt súùl-as da-óŋ-d-p-taŋ mother kids sled-INS 3SG.F.SBJ-3AN.PL.O-across-APPL-drag 'The mother takes her kids by sled.' (Vajda 2004: 82)

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(14) qim tet qimdil da-ó-v-ij-aq
 wife husband woman.child 3SG.F.SBJ-3M.O-APPL-PST-give
 'She gave her husband a baby girl.' (Vajda 2004: 82)

 The Ket case system shares with that of Yimas an opposition between overt peripheral cases (just one in Yimas vs. numerous in Ket) and a caseless unmarked form used for core arguments indexed in the verb.

- The Ket case system shares with that of Yimas an opposition between overt peripheral cases (just one in Yimas vs. numerous in Ket) and a caseless unmarked form used for core arguments indexed in the verb.
- Other languages with similar systems: Abkhaz, Abaza, Southern Tiwa, Alamblak, Warndarang.



Diegueño a.k.a. Jamul Tiipay (Yuman, USA, Mexico)

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• Diegueño case system (Gorbet 1976: 15–33):

Nominative	- <i>C</i>
Accusative	Ø
Comitative	- <i>m</i>
Ablative	- <i>k</i>
Locative	- <i>i</i>
Inessive	-L <sup>y</sup>

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Nominative	- <i>C</i>
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Inessive	-L <sup>y</sup>

- In many, although not all, "marked-S" languages, the zero Accusative case serves as a default form (König 2009; Handschuh 2014: 209-213).
- The Diegueño "Accusative" belongs precisely to this type.
- Functions of the Diegueño Accusative:
- P/T and R (direct and indirect objects):

 (15) 'kwak 'ma:t-pu 'i:pay winy deer body-DEM people give 'He gave the meat to people.' (Gorbet 1976: 17)

- Functions of the Diegueño Accusative:
- subject of a nominal predicate

(16) ixpa-pu a:şa:-c yis eagle-DEM bird-NOM COP 'The eagle is a bird.' (Gorbet 1976: 15)

#### adnominal possessor

(17) *k<sup>w</sup>sya:y n<sup>y</sup>-kuci:* doctor POSS-knife 'the doctor's knife' (Gorbet 1976: 17)

 Most notably, the Diegueño Accusative can occur in any position when the appropriate overt case marker is dropped (Gorbet 1976: 27–33; Miller 2001: 154, 160–162).

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- S/A (subject) instead of the Nominative

(18) achewaaw-ch anemak-ch w-aam wife-NOM leave.behind-SS 3-go.away 'His wife left him.' (Miller 2001: 155)

(19) kwe-nsuum paa
 3.younger.brother+DIM arrive
 'His younger brother arrived.' (Miller 2001: 160)

- Most notably, the Diegueño Accusative can occur in any position when the appropriate overt case marker is dropped (Gorbet 1976: 27–33; Miller 2001: 154, 160–162).
- Location instead of the Locative
- (20) a. *matt-i chewaw* ground-LOC put 'He put it on the ground.' (Miller 2001: 156)
  - b. *u'mall matt ke-chewaw* book ground IMP-put 'Put the book on the floor.' (Miller 2001: 160)

- The zero form of Diegueño nominals should be analysed as the default caseless form, not as "Accusative".
- There is no "Accusative" case in Diegueño, just as there is no "Absolutive" case in Harar Oromo.
- In general, the case feature in Diegueño is optional in the strict sense of the term.

- Kornfilt & Preminger (2015) (within the generative framework): no Nominative case in Sakha
- Lyutikova (2022) (within the generative framework): no Absolutive case in Khwarshi
- McGregor (2023): no Absolutive case in Gooniyandi

- Similar logic can be applied to other grammatical features as well:
- van de Velde (2006) proposes to analyse the Bantu nouns of the traditional genders 1a and 2a as "genderless nouns" triggering default agreement;
- Round (2013: 68) defines the number feature in Kayardild (Tangkic, Northern Australia) as consisting of only DUal and PLural, stating that "[m]ost often ... NUMBER is left unspecified, as NUMBER:Ø – this does not mean 'singular', rather that the speaker has chosen not to provide any information". (Cf. Koch 1990: 196 on number in Kaytetye.)

### Conclusions

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## Conclusions

- Unary grammatical features in general and one-case systems in particular exist and are not just notational variants of binary ones.
- Languages can have grammatical values with arguably "default" distributions or sets of functions, but postulating such values can only be justified by their overt formal expression.
- If one's theory requires one to postulate spurious grammatical values whose existence has no empirical support, such a theory should be revised.

Thank you for your attention! Danke für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!

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