Case and Event Structure
Peter Svenonius, University of Tromsø

Case is sometimes taken to be the uninterpretable feature par excellence; unlike past tense or plural number, accusative case cannot be assigned a consistent semantic representation. It is thought to be strictly a marker of syntactic licensing. Systematic correspondences of morphological case and semantic content are generally either separated out from Structural Case as a separate phenomenon (‘inherent case’ associated with theta-marking) or treated as historical residue, the result of the vagaries of analogy and grammaticization.

Recent work by Chomsky, Pesetsky & Torrego, Haeberli, and others has developed a notion of feature checking whereby all features are interpretable, though instantiations of features may not be interpretable. Thus, for example, nominative case and tense/finiteness are the same feature, but it is only interpretable on the verb. Nominative case morphology is then the (uninterpretable) manifestation on the nominal element of the relation into which that element enters with the (interpretable) tensed head.

In this paper, I expand this line of thinking to objective case, and work out its consequences for the Germanic languages. I propose specifically that objective case is the manifestation of the aspectual relation into which the object enters with its selecting verb; thus, in the framework at hand, case is uninterpretable aspect. My proposal bears some relation to that of Van Valin 1991, but with the important substitution of a precise (Krifkan) semantic model of Aktionsart for the RRG notion of thematic roles.

Just as the availability of nominative case may vary with the finiteness of T, so does the availability of accusative vary with the Aktionsart of V. This is most obvious in the case of Burzio’s Generalization, but can be manifested in more subtle ways; my analysis is based on two such cases: the overt case-marking of Icelandic and the interaction of transitivity with secondary predicates.

It is well-known by now that dative case is on the rise in Icelandic (‘Dative Sickness’), and significant semantic generalizations can be made about the classes of arguments to which dative case is spreading (cf. e.g. Barðdal 1993, Maling 1998). I argue that dative is used when the DP which is licensed by the Aktionsart of the verb is not a Measure of the progress of the event (in the sense of Tenny 1994). I demonstrate this with an analysis of the productive spray-load type alternations, as in (1-2).

The DP argument of spreya in (1a) appears in the accusative, but in the dative in (1b). On my account, this is because the predicate in (1a) is ‘spray’ and the extent of the car measures out the event of spraying (cf. Krifka 1992). But in (1b), the predicate is ‘spray on the car’; involving the combination of the process and the result event variables (cf. the operation of Telic Pair Formation in Higginbotham 1999). The paint is not interpreted as measuring out the event, and this is reflected in its morphological case.

Notice that dative case does not appear on the object of ‘pitch’ in (2b). This is predicted by the account, because the hay is in fact interpreted in (2b) as the Measure of the event; the event is atelic because the amount of hay is indeterminate.

(1) a. Ég spreya bílinn með málningu.
    I  spray the.car.ACC with paint

b. Ég spreya málingu á bílinn.
   I  spray paint.dat on the.car

(2) a. Við mokuðum heyri á vagninn.
    we pitched hay.dat on the.wagon

b. Við mokuðum hey allan daginn.
    we pitched hay.acc all the.day

Barðdal, Jóhanna. 1993. Accusative and dative case of objects of some transitive verbs in Icelandic and the semantic distinction between them. In Flyktforsök: Kalasbok till Christer Platzack på femtioårsdagen, Dept. of Scandinavian Languages, Lund University.


**Peter Svenonius, University of Tromsø**
Faculty of Humanities
University of Tromsø
N-9037 Tromsø
NORWAY 

peter.svenonius@hum.uit.no