

ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF A TYPOLOGY AND WHAT 'OPTIONAL'
CASE MARKERS MARK¹

A review of Carl R. Whitehead, 1981, Subject, object and indirect object: towards a typology of Papuan Languages. *LLM* 13:32-63.

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In a recent paper, Carl R. Whitehead (1981) has examined a sample of 35 non-Austronesian languages of Papua New Guinea with a view to establishing a typology of strategies for marking grammatical relations through noun and pronoun affixation and verb agreement. Of the 35 languages, 34 are verb-final in basic word order. Of these, 22 (65%) mark full NP Os differently from As and 27 (80%) mark pronominal Os differently from pronominal As. In 15 of the 22 (68%) languages that distinguish full NP Os from As, the marking is 'optional'. Twelve (35%) of the 34 verb-final languages do not distinguish the two roles on full NPs at all.

Whitehead argues that the 'optional' affixes in the languages of his sample are not case markers. He goes on to assert that since many of these verb-final languages do not have case systems, they constitute a class of counterexamples to Greenberg's Universal #41:

If in a language the verb follows both the nominal subject nominal object as the dominant order, the language almost always has a case system. (Greenberg 1966:96)

While we applaud Whitehead's intention of establishing an areal typology for an important aspect of grammar, we would like to call his conclusions into question. The reliability of the sources he uses for data on more than a third of the languages in his sample is dubious. And his argument that 'optional' case markers are not 'real' case markers is unintelligible.

1

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Understanding the subtleties of case marking systems requires a thorough familiarity with the language at hand. The data for 12 out of the 35 Papuan languages are taken from SIL grammar statements, which are usually written at an early stage of analysis. That this may not be the securest base for cross-linguistic generalizations can be seen from an examination of just one of the languages of the sample. Information given on Waris turns out to be wrong in at least three respects. We will illustrate this with data taken from Whitehead's own source (Brown 1977) and from a recent article by the same author (Brown 1981).

First, Whitehead divides the languages of his sample into five classes on the basis of the marking of full NP S, A, and O. His class I has no marking on any of the three. Class IIa marks A and S the same and does not mark O. Class IIb marks only O, Class IIc marks A and S to contrast with O marking. And Class III marks A but not S or O (ergative pattern).

The data in examples (1) through (3) (Brown 1981: 111-113) demonstrate that some Waris verbs condition a Class IIb case marking pattern (1 and 2) and others (3) condition a pattern that Whitehead has overlooked entirely. The S in example (3) bears the same suffix as the O in example (1):

(1) ka-va meya -m hevra-v
I -foc table-O hit - pres
'I bang a table' (p. 113)

(2) ka-va ga-v
I -foc go-pres
'I am going' (p. 112)

(3) he-m daha-v
he-O die -press
'He is dying' (p. 111)

Note that -va in examples (1) and (2) is a focus marker and not a case marker as can be seen from the following example (va>ba/m_):

(4) ku ka-m -ba ve-mana-v
head I -dat-foc do-ben -pres
'(my) head is doing for me' (my head aches) (p. 111)

that 'a real case marker, which serves to disambiguate NPs, is obligatory'. He concludes from this that the NP affixes in languages like Waris whose occurrence is sensitive to semantic factors such as animacy, as well as grammatical relations, 'are not inherently case markers but are giving a secondary focus' (p.51).

We would suggest that there is no need to follow Whitehead in assuming that case markers that are sensitive to the content of NPs operate 'at a higher level of the grammar than clause' (p.50).

Animate, and especially human, NPs may be particularly eligible candidates for focusing. But they are even more eligible to be the agent of a clause. When an NP whose referent is likely to have performed the action coded by the clause is not in fact the agent, it is precisely then that some kind of marking becomes necessary in order to disambiguate between two potential agents. Whitehead distinguishes (p.50) 'two types of such optional markings' those that mark A and those that mark O, Recipient, and sometimes Beneficiary. We would argue that both strategies serve precisely the same function - to distinguish two NPs in a clause that are both eligible to be A.

The evidence from Awtuw, a Ram family Sepik-Ramu language not in Whitehead's sample, is particularly revealing in this respect (Feldman, in prep). As in many of the languages in the sample, case marking occurs on all Benefactive and Recipient NPs, including pronouns:¹

- (8) Nam-o yaw ma-kow -ka rey
 1PL-O pig Go-give-PF 3sg
 'He has come and given us some pig'
- (9) wan-e yiye ka -lowpa-kow-nem!
 1SG-O gate IMP-open -BEN-PL
 'Open the gate for me!'

It also occurs on all pronominal and proper-nominal O NPs:

- (10) rey an -e du -puy-e -
 3sg 2DU-O RLS-hit-PST
 'He hit you two'

¹In examples 8 to 17 'O' glosses the relevant suffix.

- (11) rey piyren Kampo-re d - æl -i
 3sg dog Kampo-O RLS-bite-PST
 'The dog bit Kampo'

The crucial example is where A and O are both [-Human] and are nevertheless equally likely to have performed the action. In this situation the O obligatorily takes case marking:

- (12) piyren-re yaw d -æ l -i
 dog -O pig RLS-bite-PST
 'The pig bit the dog'

It is precisely when marking will serve to disambiguate between A and O that it is obligatory and precisely where the roles of the NPs are recoverable without marking that it is optional, as in the following example:

- (13) yaw(-re) wan d -iy -e
 pig(O) ISG RL-shoot-P
 'I shot a pig'

In Imonda, a language closely related to Waris, the suffix -m marks oblique Goal NPs, including goals of motion, purpose NPs, etc.

- (14) jɛf -ja -m ka wagi-f
 house-loc-goal I go -pres
 'I am going home'
- (15) sag>t-ja -m t̩ata-m ai-f>h> -n
 bush -loc-goal meat-goal pl-go down -PST
 'They went down to the bush for meat'

The same suffix also marks three classes of object NPs obligatorily. First, by straightforward extension from the 'basic' meaning of Goal, all Indirect Objects take the -m suffix. Second certain verbs, including perception verbs, condition marking on their objects regardless of animacy (this could be regarded as another case of goal marking). And third, all human objects are marked with -m. Non-human objects may be marked if they are high on the animacy hierarchy (e.g. dog) and if there is any likelihood of confusion:

- (16) sa ka-m p̩t -ai -h -u
 coconut I -O class-give-rec-imp
 'Give me a coconut!'

- (17) mol-m ka-m f -ai -h -u
 daughter-O I-O class-give-rec-imp
 'Give me your daughter!'

The suffix -m seems to serve a double function. It marks all semantic Goals. And it has been generalized to mark all [+Human] NPs that are not A. In this second function it serves unequivocally as a disambiguator.

Both Awtuw and Imonda thus have O marking conditioned in part by the animacy of the referents of the marked NPs. The situation in these two languages is therefore closely parallel to Latin, a language widely acknowledged to have a case system. '...in Latin, masculine and feminine nouns - the only genders possible for nouns denoting animate beings - distinguish nominative and accusative in all declensional classes in which they occur; but neuter nouns, which may not refer to animate entities, consistently have identical forms for nominative and accusative, again regardless of declensional class.' (Hopper and Thompson 1980:292).

Thus even if we accept Whitehead's definition of a 'real' case marking system as one whose function is to disambiguate between A and O in a clause, then there is no reason why case marking should be 'obligatory' where it does not serve this function (see also Moravcsik 1978:251).

The Awtuw and Imonda strategies for marking O NPs, like those of many of the languages in Whitehead's sample, are indeed case marking systems

If Whitehead's data are more reliable than they appear, then the twelve verb-final languages that he purports do not distinguish A and O may constitute a challenge to Greenberg's Universal #41. But the twelve that have 'optional' case marking systems do not do so any more than does Latin.

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