Deriving Inherent Case: Passives in German

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1. Introduction

It is well-known that in languages with overt morphological case, marked, or inherent, case behaves differently from regular, or structural, case with respect to various syntactic phenomena. A standard example comes from the passive construction in German, where lexically marked case, but not structural accusative case, is preserved on the derived subject, as shown in (1) and (2).

(1) a. Ich habe ihm geholfen
   I(NOM) have him(DAT) helped.
   'I helped him'

   b. Ihm wurde geholfen
   He(DAT) was helped.

(2) a. Ich liebe ihm
   I(NOM) love him(ACC)

   b. Er wird geliebt
   He (NOM) is loved

The assumption made in current GB theory (Chomsky 1986, Belletti 1988) is that inherent case is assigned at D-structure, and is θ-linked. Structural case, on the other hand, is assigned at S-structure, independently of θ-marking. Passives such as (1b) and (2b) are accounted for by assuming that passive morphology absorbs, or discharges, structural accusative case but leaves inherent case intact.

In this paper, I will argue that case assignment need not be partitioned in this way. Rather, given the appropriate representation of verbs with lexically marked case, it is possible for the process of case assignment to be treated uniformly. Differences between inherent and structural case follow entirely from the lexical representations of the various verbs.

I am adopting the grid-based theory of case and θ-role assignment assumed by Burton (this volume), in which case and θ grids are linked to each other before being assigned to an argument. As stated in the previous paper, linking in English will apply from right to left. As we shall see, I am proposing a slightly richer grid structure than was necessary for Halkomelem. Specifically, I propose that the case grid in fact consists of two grids, one consisting of structural case features, the other of morphological case features.

2. Active sentences

Returning now to the data in (1) and (2), I propose that the verbs helfen 'help' and lieben 'love' are represented as in (3).
As (3) illustrates, helfen is lexically specified as carrying a Dative case feature on the morphological case tier, which is linked to the benefactive \(\theta\)-role. Lieben, on the other hand, has no lexically specified morphological case. The object's accusative case arises through the application of a default rule which fills in accusative for a structural case position assigned by \(V\).

The representations given in (3) will allow case assignment to take place uniformly at \(S\)-structure. The default accusative rule will also apply at this point. The mechanics of case assignment are as follows: The structural case tier is linked, right to left, to the morphological case tier, giving rise to default morphological case specification. The linked tiers are associated, also right to left, to the \(\theta\)-grid, and the grid position is then coindexed with the argument in object position.

Case assignment and \(\theta\)-role assignment thus take place together, at least in a straightforward active sentence.

The foregoing necessitates a minor revision of the chain condition and/or the case filter. The requirement must now be that a chain bear exactly one morphological case feature, one structural case feature and one \(\theta\)-role.

3. Passive constructions

Before turning to German, let us look at how the theory accounts for an English passive sentence. I will deal only with agentless passives, since the account of agent phrases goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Let us assume for the moment that the effect of passive morphology is to discharge the verb's structural case position, and to make the agent optional. The representation of a passive participle will be as shown in (4).

\[
(4) \quad \text{hired} \quad <(\text{agent}), \text{theme}>
\]

\[
(*)
\]

The asterisk indicates that the grid position has been discharged. (This notation was proposed by Richard Sproat (1985).) In the examples to follow, I will simply omit the discharged structural case position from the representation of passive participles. \(\theta\)-role and case assignment in a passive sentence take place as shown in (5).
The theme position in the θ-grid of *hired* is coindexed with the trace in object position. The structural case position associated with INFL is coindexed with *John* and is specified as nominative by the default rule for INFL. The chain (John, t) is thus associated with a θ-role, a morphological case feature, and a structural case position, satisfying the case filter and the θ-criterion.

Now let's turn to German. As I said, some verbs in German assign a marked morphological case to their objects, and this case is preserved under passivization. In addition, the D-structure object of such a passive does not exhibit properties normally associated with S-structure subjects. In particular, it fails to trigger agreement on the verb, which in such a sentence is invariably third person singular. It is also possible for an expletive *es* subject to show up, indicating clearly that the deep object has not moved to subject position.

If we assume that the case filter requires that a lexical DP bear both structural and morphological case, then a sentence like (6) is prima facie evidence that passive morphology has not, in fact, absorbed structural case from the verb.

(6) *Mir wird es geholfen*  
me(DAT) become(3sg) it helped

'I am helped'

There are two lexical DP's in (6). The expletive *es* receives structural case and default nominative case from INFL, and the verb agrees with it. *Mir* has clearly retained its lexically marked dative case, assigned by *helfen*, but since the sentence is well-formed, *mir* must also have received structural case from *geholfen*. What this means is that passive morphology does not necessarily discharge the verb's structural case.

Another instance of passive morphology not discharging structural case can be found in German. There are in this language impersonal passive constructions formed with intransitive verbs, as shown in (7).

(7) a. *Es wurde jeden Abend getanzt*  
it became each evening danced

'There was dancing every evening.'
b. In Deutschland wird mehr gesungen als hier.
in Germany becomes more sung than here

'There is more singing than here.'

c. Es wurde laut gesprochen und gelacht.
it became loud spoken and laughed

'There was loud talking and laughing.'

With impersonal passives, the active verb has no structural case position for passive morphology to discharge. With passives involving marked object case, it seems that passive morphology fails to discharge the structural case position borne by the verb. Given these observations, I would like to suggest that the simplest statement regarding structural case discharge by passive morphology is that the discharge is simply optional. I will now show that this hypothesis does not overgenerate, since all cases in which discharge either wrongly happens, or wrongly fails to happen, can be excluded on independent grounds.

First, consider the case of a passive involving marked case, where passive morphology wrongly discharges the structural case feature on the verb. The S-structure of such an example is shown in (8)

(8)

The theme role, with its associated dative case feature, is coindexed with mir. The structural case feature associated with INFL, together with default nominative case, is coindexed with es. This representation violates the case filter, since mir is not coindexed with a structural case.

Now suppose that mir in (8) moved to subject position, giving (9). Recall that case assignment takes place at S-structure.
Here, the theme role, together with morphological dative case, is coindexed with the trace in object position. The structural case associated with INFL, and default nominative case, are coindexed with mir. The problem now is that the chain (mir,t) is associated with two morphological case features, violating the chain condition.

Thus no stipulation is required to ensure that in passives with marked object case, the passive morphology leave intact the verb's structural case position.

Now consider what happens when discharge wrongly fails to apply. An example is given in (10).

Here, the theme role, along with structural case (and possibly default accusative case, but see below) is coindexed with the trace in object position. The structural case from INFL, along with default nominative case, is coindexed with John. The chain (John, t) has one θ-role, but two structural cases and possibly two morphological cases, violating the chain condition.

What if John had not moved to subject position? Consider (11).
(11) 

Here, it seems that the theme role, along with structural case and default accusative, is coindexed with 

The non-thematic subject is coindexed with structural case and default nominative case from INFL. The representation seems well-formed by the 0-criterion, the case filter and the chain condition, but the sentence is ungrammatical. Such passives are also ill-formed in German when the verb assigns default, rather than lexically marked, case.

The answer, I believe, lies in the nature of the rules assigning default case. Clearly, these rules are stated in terms of the syntactic category of the element assigning case. Thus in German, the default rule associated with INFL assigns nominative case, and the default rule for V assigns accusative case. I have argued elsewhere that the default rule for P assigns dative case. Suppose that passive participles are categorically distinct from verbs. The nature of the difference is not important. If default accusative case is assigned only by verbs and if passive participles are not verbs, then the default rule will fail to apply in (11) and in similar German sentences, leaving John with no morphological case, thus giving a case filter violation.

Again we see that no stipulation is required to account for the behaviour of passive morphology.

4. Double-Object Constructions

Let us now examine passive constructions involving double-object verbs in German. The assumptions in (12) should be borne in mind.

(12) a. Passive participles are not verbs, and as such do not trigger default specification of accusative case.

b. Marked case is lexically prelinked. Thus a DP to which marked case is assigned will not occur in subject position in a passive sentence.

These two assumptions interact so as to predict that in double-object constructions, only the argument receiving default accusative case in an active sentence will surface as the subject of the corresponding passive. This prediction is borne out for verbs taking the accusative and dative, as shown in (13), and for verbs taking the accusative and genitive, as shown in (14).
(13) a. Man gab ihm den Bleistift
   someone gave him(dat) the(acc) pencil
   'The pencil was given to him'
b. Der Bleistift wurde ihm gegeben
   the(nom) pencil became him(dat) given
   'He was given the pencil'
c. *Er wurde den Bleistift gegeben
   he(nom) became the(acc) pencil given
   'He was given the pencil'

(14) a. Er beraubte mich aller meiner Hoffnungen
    he(nom) robbed me(acc) all(gen) my(gen) hopes(gen)
    'He robbed me of all my hopes'
b. Ich wurde aller meiner Hoffnungen beraubt
    I(nom) became all(gen) my(gen) hopes(gen) robbed
    'I was robbed of all my hopes'
c. *Alle meine Hoffnungen wurden mich beraubt
    all(nom) my(nom) hopes(nom) became(3pl) me(acc) robbed
    'All my hopes were robbed me'

The situation with verbs taking two accusatives is rather murky. Zaenen et al. (1985:480) state that "the few cases that still exist allow only for the passivization of one of the objects." Their example is given in (15).

(15) a. Ich habe ihn das Gedicht abgehört
    I(nom) have him(acc) the(acc) poem heard
    'I had him recite the poem'
b. Er ist das Gedicht abgehört
    he(nom) is the(acc) poem heard
c. *Das Gedicht ist ihn abgehört
    the(nom) poem is him(acc) heard

On the other hand, Curme (1905:565) gives the verb lehren 'teach' with two passives, shown in (16).

(16) a. Ich werde das nicht gelehrt
    I(nom) become(1sg) that(acc) not taught
    'I was not taught that'
b. Das wird mich nicht gelehrt
    that(nom) become(3sg) me(acc) not taught
    'That was not taught (to) me'

However, even Curme says that lehren, when used in the passive, more commonly assigns dative case to the goal θ-role, in which case only the theme can occur as the subject of the passive. This reduces lehren to the geben case described above.

It would be foolhardy to base any significant revision of the theory on the limited and inconsistent data available for double accusative verbs. The facts cited by Zaenen et al. (1985) are consistent with my analysis, if das Gedicht is the DP bearing marked case. The example given by Curme is hard to account for, but given its marginal status, it
could perhaps be treated as an instance of confusion. There might be variation between speakers or even within the same speaker as to which of the two accusatives governed by *lehren* is analyzed as the marked one. In any case, I shall not be concerned with this example, since it seems to have disappeared from the language some time ago.

Another prediction made by my analysis about double object verbs is that it should be impossible to form an impersonal passive with such a verb. Since these verbs have one internal argument bearing default case, they should behave like regular transitive verbs with respect to impersonal passives. This prediction also seems to be correct: in none of the sources have I been able to find any reference to a construction like (17).

(17) Es wird mir einen Bleistift gegeben
    it become(3sg) me(dat) a(acc) pencil given

'It was to me a pencil given'

Let us briefly summarize what we know about passives in German. First, passive morphology only optionally discharges a case position on the verb. This optionality allows for the existence of impersonal passives, both with intransitive verbs and with verbs governing marked case. Impersonal passives are impossible with verbs taking default case, since default case cannot be spelled out on a passive participle. Regular passives are impossible with verbs taking marked case, since marked case is lexically linked to the θ-grid, and the derived subject would therefore be associated with two morphological case features, violating the chain condition.

5. Impersonal Passives

A question which I would like to address now is that of the absence of impersonal passives in English. There are two types of impersonal passives in German, neither of which occurs in English. The first type is the *helfen* construction, where the verb is transitive, but assigns lexically marked morphological case. Recall that verbs assigning default accusative case could not form an impersonal passive. If we assume that all English transitive verbs assign default objective case, then the absence of this type of impersonal passive is straightforwardly explained. However, German also has impersonal passives involving intransitive verbs, as given in (7), repeated here as (18).

(18) a. Es wurde jeden Abend getanzt.
    it become each evening danced

    'There was dancing every evening.'

b. In Deutschland wird mehr gesungen als hier.
    in Germany becomes more sung than here

    'In Germany there is more singing than here.'

c. Es wurde laut gesprochen und gelacht.
    it become loud spoken and laughed

    'There was loud talking and laughing.'

If we assume that passive morphology only optionally discharges structural case, then it seems that (19) ought to be grammatical.

(19) *It was laughed and talked yesterday.

I can think of two possible ways to exclude (19). The first way, which I find unattractive, is to postulate a parameter relating to optional versus obligatory discharge of a structural case position by the passive morphology. German would have passive morphology optionally discharge a structural case position, while English would have obligatory discharge. My problem with this idea is first that it has no independent
motivation that I know of, and second that it weakens the generality of the analysis I am proposing. Another approach is to appeal to a difference between German and English expletives. The expletive it in English normally forms part of an expletive-argument pair, as in (20).

(20) It is obvious that Sue is crazy.

In (19), there is no obvious argument for the expletive to be associated with. Perhaps expletives in German need not be associated with an argument, while expletives in English must be.

6. Inherent Partitive Case

Belletti (1988) makes use of inherent case in her account of the definiteness effect. It is her claim that unaccusative verbs, as well as regular transitive verbs, can assign inherent partitive case to their internal arguments. Partitive case, which carries with it the meaning 'part of the set of', is incompatible with definite or universally quantified DP's.

Consider the sentences in (21).

(21) a. All'improvviso è entrato un uomo/*l'uomo dalla finestra
    suddenly is entered a man/*the ... from-the window

    b. All'improvviso l'uomo è entrato dalla finestra
    suddenly the-man is entered from-the window

The verb 'enter' in Italian is unaccusative, and as such takes an underlying internal argument. As shown in (21), the argument may remain in object position only if it is indefinite. Definite DP's are possible only if the argument moves to subject position. Belletti's explanation for this phenomenon is that when the argument remains in postverbal position, it is casemarked by the verb, whereas when it moves to subject position, it is casemarked by INFL. Since in her theory unaccusative verbs assign only inherent partitive case, and not structural case, the only arguments which can remain in postverbal position are indefinites. If the argument moves to subject position, it receives nominative case from INFL rather than partitive case from the verb, and as such exhibits no restriction as to definiteness.

Belletti's claim that such verbs may assign inherent partitive case is expressed in this theory by the representation in (22).

(22) entrare: <theme>
    (PART)

If partitive case is assigned to the internal argument, then structural case is also assigned. The internal argument must in that case be indefinite, or else partitive case will be incompatible with its meaning. On the other hand, if partitive case is not assigned to the argument, then neither is structural case. The argument must then move to subject position so as to receive structural case and default nominative case.

Belletti also shows that passive verbs in French may assign partitive case, triggering the definiteness effect. This is illustrated in (23).

(23) a. Il a été tué un homme
    it has been killed a man

    b. *Il a été tué l'homme
    it has been killed the man
What this means is that transitive verbs in French must in general have a representation such as the one in (24).

(24)  \langle agent, theme> \\
      \langle PART \rangle \\

In the passive construction, assuming that passive morphology optionally absorbs structural case, it follows that structural case must be absorbed if there is no morphological partitive case, and cannot be absorbed if partitive case is present. This runs parallel to the situation with helfen and lieben above.

7. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a revision of case theory which eliminates the need for D-structure assignment of inherent case. Inherent case essentially amounts to lexically prespecified morphological case, while what has been called structural case is default morphological case. Chains must now receive both morphological case, either from a lexical specification or from the application of a default case rule, and structural case. I have argued that passive morphology is best viewed as only optionally discharging a structural case feature, and that independently motivated well-formedness conditions on chains ensure that discharge happens exactly where it should. Case assignment can take place uniformly at S-structure.

NOTES

* This is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Linguistics Association, Windsor, Ontario, May, 1988.

1 I have used a structure corresponding to an embedded sentence, to eliminate irrelevant complications having to do with the verb-second order in matrix clauses.

2 This example, and the one following, are from Curme (1905:563).

References


Burton, Strang. (this volume). 'Thematic Relations in Halkomelem Salish'.


