# Case — Basic Concepts, p. 1

Case: a marking which accompanies NPs as an indication of their function in the sentence.

## Grammatical/Core/Structural Cases

**Nominative**— the citation form of a noun. This can be thought of as the "unmarked" Case. In some languages, the unmarked form has no morphological marking. As we will see, in some Case-marking patterns, this Case is called **Absolutive**.
**Accusative**— the "marked" Case typically used for marking direct objects
**Ergative**— the "marked" Case typically used for marking subjects (especially in transitive clauses)

## Semantic/Inherent Cases

**Dative**— the Case often used for indirect objects, goals, and experiencers
**Genitive**— the Case most commonly used for inside a nominal phrase, especially possessors
**Instrumental**— instrument. In many languages, also passive agent.
**Locative**— expresses location.

An example from Russian. The noun *книга* /kniga/ 'book' has the following forms:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| nominative | книга | kniga |
| accusative | книгу | knigu |
| dative | книге | knige |
| genitive | книги | knigi |
| instrumental | книгой | knigoj |
| locative | книге | knige |

In other languages, Case is expressed as an adposition-like word rather than a suffix (such as את in Hebrew). From the perspective of the syntax of Case, it doesn't matter which way Case is expressed.

We will be looking primarily at the grammatical Cases, not the semantic Cases. The primary distinction will be between **unmarked** and **marked** Case, and how they are used in indicating the core arguments of the clause: **S** (the sole argument of an intransitive clause), **A** (the agent-like argument of a transitive clause), and **P** (the patient-like argument of a transitive clause, sometimes called O). In familiar languages, A is subject and P is object. However, since the question of subjecthood is what is under discussion here, we will avoid using the terms subject and object.

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The usual situation is one where S and A have unmarked Case ("nominative") and P has a marked Case ("accusative").

Languages: English, Hebrew, Russian, Greek, Arabic, Spanish, Malayalam, Hawaiian, Latin, Quechua, German, ...

Examples:
(1)     Imbabura Quechua (Quechuan; Imbabura, Ecuador)
        Juan   aicha- ta     micu- rca.
        Juan   meat-  ACC    eat-   PST.3
        'Juan ate meat.'
(2)     Latin (Indo-European>Italic; extinct: Rome)
        a.      Domin-  us      veni-  t.
                master- NOM     come-  3SG
                'The master comes.'
        b.      Serv-   us      domin-  um    audi- t.
                slave-  NOM     master- ACC   hear-  s
                'The slave hears the master'

Such a language is called **nominative-accusative**.

(Note: In these diagrams, boldface means "marked Case".)
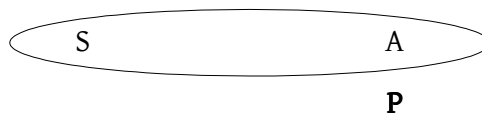
In some languages, S and P have unmarked Case (usually called "absolutive") and A has marked Case (ergative). This is found in many languages of Australia (Dyirbal, Warlpiri, Diyari, Yidin$^y$, etc.), Eskimo languages (Inuit, Yupik), Basque, Georgian, Avar, Chukchee, Hindi-Urdu, Tongan, Samoan, and many others.

Examples in Falk (2006), p. 8, examples (12)–(15)
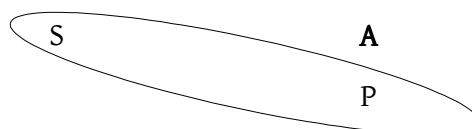
These languages are called **ergative**.

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Some of these ergative languages are actually **split ergative**, meaning that some types of NPs display an ergative pattern and others a nominative-accusative pattern. See the Dyirbal examples in the textbook on p. 113 (16, 17, 18), showing an ergative pattern for full NPs and a nominative-accusative pattern for pronouns. It is important to note that split-ergative languages have distinct ergative and accusative Cases, showing that the marked Cases differ from each other.

Also, the term ergative language is also generally used for languages in which there is no Case marking, but agreement groups S and P together as opposed to A. The Mayan languages (Tzotzil, K'ekchi, etc.) are like this; see Falk (2006) p. 9 (16). On the other hand, some ergative languages, like Warlpiri, have ergative Case marking but nominative-accusative agreement! (See Falk 2006 p. 9 (17).)

In another class of languages, primarily languages of the Philippines, any element of the clause can have unmarked Case; verbal morphology (often called "voice") marks which element it is. See Falk (2006) p. 10 (18) These are called **Philippine-type** languages.

In a very few languages, there is a consistent pattern in which A and P both carry marked Case (ergative and accusative, respectively). S is unmarked (nominative/absolute).

Examples:
(3)     <u>Nez Perce</u> (Penutian; Idaho, United States)
    a.      Wewúkiye- ne     pée-            'wi-    ye      háama- nm.
            elk-        ACC    3SUBJ.3OBJ-     shoot-  PERF    man-    ERG
            'The man shot an elk.'
    b.      Hi-     páayn-  a       háama.
            3SUBJ-  arrive- PERF    man
            'The man arrived.'

(4)     <u>Antekerrepenhe</u> (Australian>Pama-Nyungan>Arandic; s. Northern Territory, Australia)
    a.      Arengke- le     aye- nhe   ke-   ke.
            dog-        ERG    me-  ACC   bite-  PST
            'The dog bit me.'
    b.      Apwerte- le         athe    arengke- nhe    we-   ke.
            stones-   INSTR    I.ERG   dog-        ACC    pelt-  PST
            'I pelted the dog with stones.'
    c.      Arengke nterre- ke.
            dog        run-     PST
            'The dog ran.'

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(5)     <u>Wangkumara</u> (Australian>Pama-Nyungan; western New South Wales/Queensland border area, Australia)
      a.      Kaṇa- ulu   kalka- ŋa   ṯiṯi- ṇaṇa.
              man- ERG  hit-    PST  dog- FEM.ACC
              'The man hit the (female) dog.'
      b.      Kaṇa- ia     palu- ŋa.
              man- NOM  die-  PST
              'The man died.'

                               S                  **A**
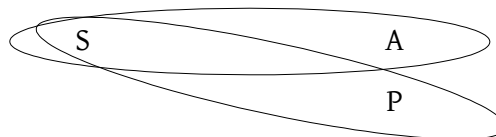
                                                    **P**

These are called **three-way** or **tripartite** languages.

Finally, there are languages in which S is not treated uniformly. Instead, agentive Ss are Case-marked like A or trigger agreement like A and patientive Ss are Case-marked like P or trigger agreement like P. See Falk (2006) pp. 11–12. These are called **active** languages.



We will not be discussing active languages in this course (but they are discussed in Falk 2006, in Chapter 6).