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Review: Pragmatics; Semantics: Kagain (2020)

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Date: 28-Apr-2022**From:** Francesca Dell'Oro <francesca.delloro@unine.ch>**Subject:** The Semantics of Case[E-mail this message to a friend](#)[Discuss this message](#)Book announced at <https://linguistlist.org/issues/31/31-1764.html>

AUTHOR: Olga Kagan

TITLE: The Semantics of Case

SERIES TITLE: Key Topics in Semantics and Pragmatics

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SUMMARY

"The semantics of case", by Olga Kagan, is a handy monograph belonging to the series "Key topics in semantics and pragmatics" published by Cambridge University Press. This series has been conceived with the challenging aim of discussing relevant issues in semantic and pragmatic theory by providing accessible content. The idea is that each book in the series should be suitable for use in courses and seminars. It goes without saying that the double task of delving into cutting-edge research issues, while keeping a reader-friendly approach, is a daunting undertaking.

"The semantics of case" deals with the crucial question of the interrelations between case and meaning, by providing readers with an in-depth and critical overview of the main issues at stake. Notably, while the author adopts the generative approach and mainly discusses the relevant literature based on it, other approaches are also taken into account. "Case" is defined as "the marking of the nominal that reflects its relation to other elements in the sentence" (p. 8). Interestingly, Kagan (henceforth K), points out that even within the minimalist approach some scholars have suggested that "a case feature may be (construed as) semantic/interpretable" (p. 9). However, she has made the important decision not to tackle the question of whether case is primary and the semantics secondary or vice versa, on the grounds that this is a matter subject to theory-internal considerations.

The theme of the interrelations between case and meaning is dealt with from a crosslinguistic perspective, with a focus on languages and families of which the author often has first-hand knowledge. K. has chosen to structure the book in a logical and didactic way, starting from more basic concepts—such as the dative case and the spatial cases—and progressing to more complex ones—such as case alternations and the "predicate case". Each chapter systematically draws on the contents of the previous one and this creates a strong feeling of cohesion.

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In the introduction K. observes that "in many instances, case-checking depends on the purely syntactic configuration [...] rather than on semantic considerations" (p. 1). She gives as an example the fact that in nominative-accusative languages nominative marks subjecthood and can be associated with several theta-roles, including agents, experiencers, instruments, and themes. However, in some situations, such as those involving case alternation, case-marking is clearly interrelated with semantics and pragmatics. For example, case-marking can correlate with aspect. In Finnish accusative-marking of an object licences a bounded interpretation of the sentence, while partitive-marking of the same object licences an unbounded or progressive reading. Compare (1) with (2), cited on page 2:

(1) Join veden.

drank.1sg water.acc

'I drank the water.'

(2) Join vettä.

drank.1sg water.part

'I drank some water.' or 'I was drinking water.'

With this example and many others, the author raises a fair number of questions such as that of the direct or mediated nature of the relationship between case and semantics. K. then outlines fundamental distinctions between case types, by introducing readers to fundamental notions and oppositions, such as morpho-syntactic case (observable in case languages such as Russian) vs abstract case (i.e., not observable, not morphologically realised case such as in English); purely morphological case (based only on its morpho-phonological form) vs morpho-syntactic case (based not only on its morpho-phonological form, but also on its distribution and/or function). Also introduced are the notions of "case system", "morpho-syntactic alignment", "split-ergativity", "case hierarchy", and finally the—not uncontroversial—distinctions between "structural case" (i.e., purely morpho-syntactic such as nominative), "inherent case" (i.e., related to the assignment of a thematic role), "lexical case" (an idiosyncratic, lexically selected case which can be opposed to a restricted definition of "inherent"), and "semantic case" (drawing on Butt and King [2005], semantic case shows the properties of a structural case, but is also related to certain semantic notions, such as the partitive in Finnish, which is associated with atelicity and indefiniteness).

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on cases the presence of which is related to theta-role assignment. Chapter 2 deals with the dative case. After having presented the thematic roles and the additional environments—such as modal predicates or possessor datives—in which dative case can be found, K. outlines some specific analyses. Chapter 3 focuses on case and spatial relations, offering a description of complex spatial case systems in languages such as Tabasaran, Tsez, and Bezhta from the Nakh-Daghestanian family. An outline of non-spatial uses of spatial cases follows, focused on metaphorical extension and reduced and demoted agentivity. K. then discusses the challenges involved in the formal analysis of spatial cases, as these are clearly associated with semantic content which, moreover, is not independently contributed by the predicate. The chapter concludes with an outline of the interaction of spatial cases and prepositions.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 K. discusses different types of object case alternations. Chapter 4 is devoted to the interaction of case and aspect. The author outlines the distribution of accusative and partitive objects in the Finnic languages, then deals with accusative adjuncts from a cross-linguistic perspective and with the complements of prepositions in some Indo-European languages. Chapter 5 is dedicated to (asymmetric) Differential Object Marking (henceforth DOM) and partially also to Differential Subject Marking. K. tries to elucidate the possible reasoning behind DOM and whether there is a direct rather than indirect influence of the verb. She then provides a critical overview of some cross-linguistic analyses. In Chapter 6 the focus is on the genitive/accusative alternation observed in the Balto-Slavic languages. The author deals with the Genitive of Negation, the Intensional Genitive, and the Partitive Genitive. K. discusses the possibility of giving them a unified account. Interestingly, DOM and the genitive/accusative alternation (seen as an instance of symmetric differential marking) are assimilated with respect to the property of individuation, to which both phenomena are sensitive.



Chapter 7 is dedicated to the "predicate case". Here K. focuses on nominal predicates, for which case-marking depends on semantic notions, such as change, temporariness, and permanence. She deals with instrumental predicates in Slavic, with the essive case in the Uralic languages, and, finally, with the translativity case in Finno-Ugric languages.

The final chapter reports the author's generalisations and conclusions. She finds that case can be related to the following three semantic areas: 1) thematic roles and related concepts; 2) individuation; and 3) aspect and tense. Each case the author has dealt with correlates with semantic features. For example, accusative correlates with boundedness, goalhood, and individuation (in DOM), and the genitive with low individuation, property type, source, etc. K. emphasises that the relation that holds between case and meaning is often indirect and recalls that defining its nature is in many instances subject to theory-internal considerations. Within the minimalist framework the author recognises four types of contributors: 1) a lexical head, typically V or P; 2) a functional head; 3) the (case-marked) DP; and 4) the case-marker itself.

Each chapter ends with a further reading section. A useful glossary is available at the end of the book.

EVALUATION

The book succeeds in giving a manageable, but in-depth and critical overview of the discussion about case-assignment and its interrelations with meaning. Notably, the content is presented in a crystal-clear style and remains for the most part accessible to people with no specific background in formal approaches to linguistics. Both the book itself and each chapter within it are structured along a didactic principle of growing complexity, which enables readers to become familiar with the simplest aspects before reading about more complex matters. It is also a very stimulating read, as, after having discussed the pros and cons of the hypotheses suggested in the scholarly literature, the author also clearly shows which issues still remain without an answer.

It goes without saying that the book does not aim to be exhaustive and—as is to be expected—generative and formal approaches are by far better represented than other ones. As the principles of the reasoning are always explicitly stated, I find that the book can be read with profit by scholars working in very different frameworks. While this book has many merits, there are some aspects which could be improved. For example, the themes of the "Discussion" sections seem to have been selected and the sections introduced in a somewhat arbitrary way. From a didactic perspective a more structured insertion of these sections might be helpful. I am also not convinced about the author's choice not to distinguish between lexical or pre-modal values (cf. ex. 7c, p. 45)—for the distinction between pre-modal and modal, see van der Auwera and Plungian 1998. In fact, there could be differences in the syntactic structures involved. For instance, in Korean there is no double nominative construction in the second case: cf. (3) Ku-nun (NOM) cha-ka (NOM) philyohata 'He needs a car' vs (4) Ku-nun (NOM) cha-ru (ACC) saya hanta 'He needs to buy a car'. However, these are small details which do not affect the overall excellent quality of this book.

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Francesca Dell'Oro is Assistant Professor at the University of Neuchâtel and an Associate Fellow of CHS – Harvard University. She leads the WoPoss project on modality in Latin in a diachronic perspective (<https://woposs.unine.ch>). She is particularly interested in the theory of modality and in the emergence of modal constructions. She is also interested in the didactics of ancient languages and innovative teaching methods (on which she has recently edited the volume *Méthodes et modèles de l'apprentissage des langues anciennes, vivantes et construites, hier et aujourd'hui*: <https://www.cahiers-clsl.ch/issue/view/79>).