
Case and Agreement Systems

The notions of case and agreement have played a role in many of the discussions in previous chapters. However, there has not been much said about how these systems operate in language or how complicated they may get. In this chapter, I discuss such issues in more depth. In the first section, the interaction of case and agreement is examined. In Section 2.0, the question of just how much case and agreement is found in languages is addressed. To keep the discussion to a manageable size, I restrict attention to agreement between verbs and noun phrases and the role of case at the clause level.

1.0. Marking of Grammatical Relations

It has been pointed out several times in previous chapters that case marking, agreement, and constituent order can all function at the clause level to indicate the relationship that a noun phrase bears to a verb. For instance, in Chapter 8, Section 2.2, the use of case affixes to mark verbal arguments was labeled as a type of dependent marking, whereas the use of agreement affixes on the verb was identified as the parallel head-marking device, and the use of constituent order was an example of no marking (i.e., neither the head verb nor the nominal dependents were morphologically marked to reflect their syntactic association). Indeed, it is most likely true that all natural languages use at least one of these relation-marking strategies to identify the nominals that have unique grammatical relations (such as subject and object) or unique semantic relations (such as agent and patient) or both.

All languages, rather than relying exclusively on constituent order, case, or agreement to encode such relations, utilize elements of two or three of the strategies (1).

(1)	umugabo	y-ataaye	umwaana	mu	maazi
	c1.man	c1-threw	child	in	water

The man has thrown the child into the water.

It is clear in the Kinyarwanda (Niger-Congo: Rwanda) sentence in (1) that *umugabo* ("man") is the subject of the clause because Kinyarwanda places subjects preverbally and a subject agreement prefix obligatorily appears on the verb. The direct object, *umwaana* ("child") is typical in occurring post-verbally. Similarly, we know that *maazi* ("water") is a locative expression because it is flagged by the preposition *mu* (Note: Adpositions are frequently considered to be a type of case marker). In Kinyarwanda, then, all three marking strategies are employed: Subjects are encoded via constituent order and agreement, objects by constituent order, and other nominals by prepositions.

Given that languages have various mechanisms at their disposal to identify the grammatical and semantic relationships that nominals bear to the clause, the question arises as to whether the usage of these mechanisms

follows any typical or universal patterns. Some answers to this query are provided in the following sections.

■ 1.1. Case and Agreement Hierarchies

Although languages may utilize multiple marking strategies, the use of these strategies is not haphazard but follows some basic principles. First, even languages that make use of all the types of relation marking generally have one strategy that dominates, particularly in the marking of core relations (subject, direct object, and indirect object). Certain constructions or subsystems in the language, however, stray from the dominant strategy. Thus, English nearly always uses constituent order to demarcate subject and object but additionally uses case when pronouns are involved (e.g., *she* for subjects and *her* for objects).

Another observable principle is that case and agreement typically operate according to a hierarchy of relations. The agreement hierarchy is provided in Figure 9.1. This hierarchy predicts that if verb agreement is employed to signal the grammatical relation of any one nominal, it will be with the subject. If there is agreement with only two nominals, they will be subject and object, and so on. Although the hierarchy is not an absolute, it does capture the typical situation. Therefore, we expect only rarely to come across languages in which, for example, an indirect object agrees with the verb but a subject does not. It should be noted that as one moves to the right on the hierarchy, the frequency with which one finds agreement falls off drastically. That is, subject agreement is extremely common, object agreement much less common, indirect object agreement fairly uncommon, and agreement with other nominals quite rare.

Interestingly, the hierarchy that indicates the correlation between grammatical relation and case operates in the opposite direction (Figure 9.2). On the basis of this hierarchy, one does not expect to find many languages that mark subjects, but not any other relations, with case, or any languages in which subjects and indirect objects are marked with case but not direct objects, etc.

The two hierarchies, then, naturally fit together (Figure 9.3). When languages use both case and agreement, they tend to parcel out the work so that the grammatical relations of nominals are not doubly marked. Therefore, wherever agreement stops along the hierarchy for a given language, case picks up with little overlap. This is the case, for example, in Turkish (Turkic: Turkey):

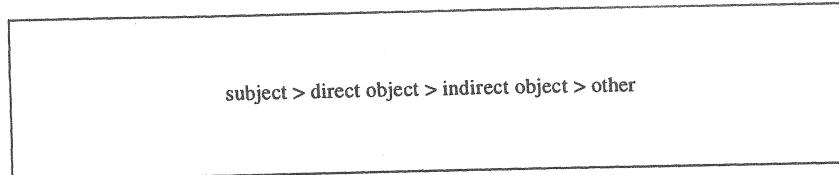


Figure 9.1. The Agreement Hierarchy

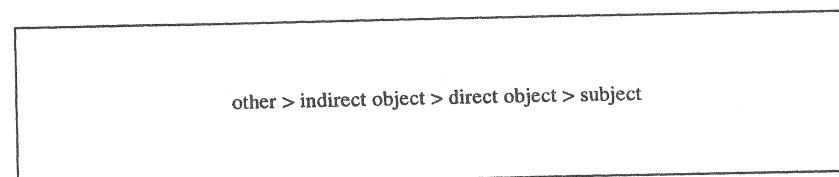


Figure 9.2. The Case Hierarchy

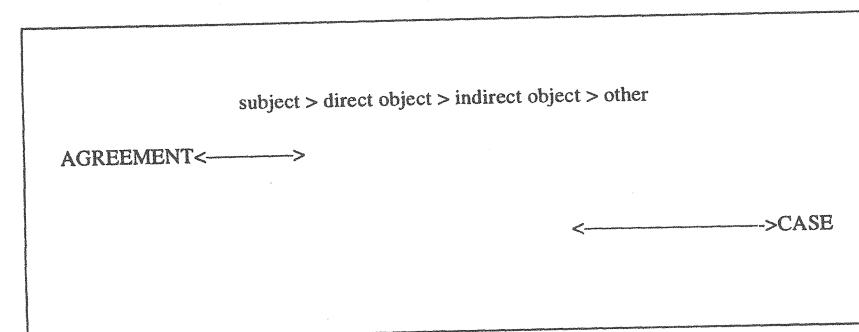


Figure 9.3. Relationship Between Case and Agreement

- (2) a. Ben bu makale-yi yarın bitir-eceğ-im
I this article-ACC tomorrow finish-FUT-1S
I shall finish this article tomorrow.
- b. Hasan çocuk-a elma-yı ver-di
Hasan child-DAT apple-ACC give-PST
Hasan gave the apple to the child.
- c. Kitap-lar masa-dan yer-e düştü
book-P table-ABL floor-DAT fall-PST
The books fell from the table to the floor.
- (Data from Kornfilt 1987)

In Turkish, verb agreement only occurs with subjects. Consequently, in (2a) the prefix *-im* marks the presence of a first-person singular subject,¹ and whereas the subject is caseless, other nominals are marked by case suffixes (in bold type).

Although languages are similar in that they typically devote morphosyntax to the marking of relations in these ways, they differ, sometimes greatly, in the types of relations that are central to their clause structure. The linguist's job would be straightforward if "subjects" and "objects" in all languages were basically the same as in English, but they are not. In the following section, we examine some common ways in which languages differ with regard to which grammatical relations they choose to encode in their morphology and syntax.

■ 1.2. S, A, and P

To discuss how languages can differ from English in the grammatical relations they mark at the clause level, it is necessary to introduce some terminology. Consider the following sentences in (3):

- (3) a. John crushed the can.
b. Bill disappeared.

In the pair of sentences given in (3), the first sentence is transitive (i.e., has a direct object), and the second sentence is intransitive (i.e., does not have a direct object). Regardless of whether the sentence is transitive or intransitive, there is no doubt that the nominals *John* and *Bill* are subjects. In fact, for speakers of English it is difficult to see how *John* and *Bill* could be treated in any other way than straightforwardly as the subjects of their respective sentences.

Languages do differ, however, in the treatment of nominals that are equivalent to *John* and *Bill*. In some languages, *Bill* in (3b) is treated in the morphosyntax more like the direct object (*the can*) of (3a) than the subject (*John*). This is true, for instance, in Lakota (Almosan-Keresiouan: United States and Canada):²

- (4) a. a-ma-ya-phe
LOC-1-2-hit
You hit me.

b. *ma-haske*

1-tall

I am tall.

In the first Lakhota sentence, verb agreement is employed to index the subject (*ya-* marks second person) and the object (*ma-* marks first person). A startling occurrence happens in (4b). Instead of subject agreement appearing on the verb, the lone participant is referred to with the object agreement prefix.

Clearly, some new terminology is needed to allow us to describe what is happening. After all, to call "I" in (4b) a subject masks the fact that it is signaled by object agreement; to call "I" an object, however, misses the fact that the sentence parallels (3b). Hence, I introduce some labels that have become fairly standard in overviews of case and agreement systems³ (Diagram 9.1).

S—the nominal that corresponds to the subject of an English intransitive clause.

A—the nominal that corresponds to the subject of an English transitive clause.

P—the nominal that corresponds to the object of an English transitive clause.

Diagram 9.1

We can use these terms to describe transitive and intransitive clauses regardless of how nominals are indexed.

(5) a. Juan-∅ aywa-n

Juan-CM go-3S

He(S) goes.

b. Juan-∅ maqa-ma-n

Juan-CM hit-1S-3S

Juan(A) hit me(P).

c. Juan-∅ Pedro-ta maqa-n-∅

Juan-CM Pedro-CM hit-3S-3S

Juan(A) hits Pedro(P).

(Adapted from Weber 1981)

(6) a. W-as-∅ w-ekér-ula

MSC-child-CM MSC-run-PRES

The boy(S) runs.

b. Inssu-cca j-as-∅ j-écc-ula

father-CM FEM-child-CM FEM-praise-PRES

Father(A) praises the girl(P). (Data adapted from Ebeling as cited in

Blake 1994)

The Quechua (Equatorial-Tucanoan: Peru) data in (5) are reminiscent of the English pattern of core marking: S and A are treated alike in the morphosyntax. Specifically, they both are marked on the verb with a suffix that occurs immediately after the root, and they have no overt case marking (indicated in the data by CM). P, on the other hand, is case marked, and the agreement suffix that indexes it occurs outside the agreement suffix for A. When S and A are encoded the same way, the system is frequently referred to as **nominative-accusative**. On the other hand, the Avar (Caucasian: Russia) sentences in (6) are like the Lakhota data given previously: S and P are treated alike. This can be determined by comparing the case-marking and agreement patterns of (6a) and (6b). The S and P nominals have no case but do evince verb agreement. Alternatively, the A nominal does have a case suffix, but it does not agree with the verb. When S and P are grouped together in this manner, the system is frequently referred to as **ergative-absolutive**.

It is common to find ergative-absolutive systems, especially in case marking and agreement. Much less common is constituent order that follows this pattern, but it does exist as the Makusi (Carib: Brazil) data show in the following:

(7) a. pemonkon-yami witi-'pi

man-P go-PST

The men(S) went.

b. tuna ekaranmapo-'pi uuri-ya

water ask.for-PST I-ERG

I(A) asked for water(P).

In (7), S and P are preverbal, whereas A is postverbal. In terms of basic constituent order, Makusi is using an ergative-absolutive system.

When considering the logically possible groupings of S, A, and P, there are three other systems that might occur in addition to nominative-

accusative and ergative-absolutive (see Kibrik 1985 for a more in-depth examination of this topic). All the potential types are listed in (8) along with a general indication of how commonly they arise in the languages of the world.

Possible Groupings of S, A, and P

(8)	<i>Grouping</i>	<i>Label</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
	[A, S] [P]	Nominative-accusative	Common
	[A] [S, P]	Ergative-absolutive	Common
	[A] [S] [P]	Tripartite	Very rare
	[S] [A, P]	Accusative focus	Unattested
	[A, S, P]	Neutral	Unattested

In a **tripartite** system, S, A, and P all receive unique morphosyntactic treatment. Compare the following transitive (9a) and intransitive (9b) clauses from Wangkumara (Pama-Nyungan: Australia):

- (9) a. Kana-ulu kalkana titi-nana
 man-ERG hit dog-ACC(FEM)
 The man(A) hit the bitch(P).
 b. Kana-ia paluna
 man-NOM died
 The man(S) died.

(Data from Mallinson and Blake 1981)

As these data show, A, S, and P all take distinct case suffixes.⁴ A true tripartite system—that is, one in which A, S, and P are consistently treated uniquely—is extremely rare. It is more common, although still quite rare, for a language to use a tripartite system for a certain subset of the noun phrases in the language, such as pronouns.

In an **accusative-focus** system, the sole verbal argument in an intransitive clause is treated distinctly from the two arguments of a transitive clause. This system would, of course, put a heavy burden on the users of the language who employed it because there would be no means to distinguish between subjects and objects in transitive clauses other than context. Not surprisingly, no full accusative-focus systems are known to exist, although Comrie (1989) notes that some Iranian languages use this system for certain classes of nouns.

In a **neutral** system, there is no morphosyntactic differentiation between

linguistic means to differentiate between subjects and objects in transitive clauses.

Of the five possible ways of handling S, A, and P, only two are at all common. Why should this be? Like many other typological patterns we have previously encountered, the relative frequency of the different case-agreement systems requires an explanation. Specifically, we need to address the following question: Why should systems reflecting accusativity or ergativity be most common, tripartite extremely rare, and the other options nonexistent? There seems to be a reasonable functional explanation for this distribution.

Recall that a major function of case, agreement, word order, or all three is to identify semantic or grammatical relations. On the basis of this observation, we might set up the following principle (adopted from Gerdts 1990; see also Kibrik 1991):

- (10) *Relational visibility:* The relation of a nominal must be recoverable from the morphosyntax of a language.

This principle accounts for why accusative-focus and neutral systems never develop into the dominant strategy for signaling core grammatical relations. Because the A and P are indistinguishable, their grammatical relations cannot be recovered from the morphosyntax.

In the discussion of the case and agreement hierarchies earlier in the chapter, it was noted that languages tend not to allow multiple marking of the same nominal. For example, if the case marking makes it clear what the direct object is, generally there will not also be object agreement. It is likely that this follows from the following broad functional principle (also from Gerdts 1990):

- (11) *Relational economy:* Systems of relational marking tend to avoid redundancy. That is, nominals tend not to be multiply identified, and unneeded morphosyntactic distinctions are avoided.

In both nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive systems, A and P are distinguished from one another. That is, in transitive clauses the principle of visibility holds. Because S never co-occurs with A or P, there is no need to offer S unique marking to meet the requirements of relational visibility. True to the principle of relational economy, S is simply marked as either A or P

A tripartite system also meets the principle of relational visibility because A and P are distinguishable from their respective marking(s). Tripartite systems, however, violate the principle of economy. Because S cannot be confused with A or P, it is not economical to give it its own marking. Rather, a language will either group S and A (nominative-accusative) or group S and P (ergative-absolutive).

Both these principles govern tendencies and not absolutes. They are designed to capture the most common scenario. Quite obviously, case, agreement, and word order can also be used to indicate information other than grammatical relations (e.g., discourse notions such as topicality or semantic notions such as animacy or definiteness). For this reason, the principles can be violated in certain constructions. Furthermore, the system employed by a language can change over time. In the course of the transitions, violations to the principles may also arise.

■ 1.3. Split Case and Agreement Systems

Up to this point, I have intentionally simplified the discussion of case and agreement systems, although it may not seem that way! We have been assuming that languages are largely nominative-accusative, consistently ergative-absolutive, etc. In reality, a single language often uses two or more of these systems depending on the type of construction that is involved. Such splits, as they are often called, typically result from the following: the semantic content of the verb, the tense and aspect of the verb, or the semantic-pragmatic content of the noun.

To understand how the semantic content of the verb might influence the choice of a marking system, it is useful to ask the following questions: What is similar about S and A that a language would opt to treat them in the same way? and What is it about S and P that a language would treat them in the same way? Both of these questions are addressed in turn.

It is very common for verbs to represent an event that typically includes a participant who is an agent (12).

- (12) a. Phil killed Bill.
- b. Phil was running.

As in the English sentences in (12), agents are almost always either S or A in active clauses.⁵ A nominative-accusative system capitalizes on this semantic

The lexicons of all languages, however, also include many verbs that describe a change of state (13).

- (13) a. *mgel-i* *movk'ali*
wolf-NOM 1.kill.3
I killed the wolf.
- b. *mgel-i* *mok'vda*
wolf-NOM 3.died
The wolf died.

(Data from Harris 1982)

In these examples from Georgian (South Caucasian: Georgia), *mgel* ("wolf") is changing from a state of life to a state of death. Although the nominal is a P in (13a) and an S in (13b), it receives the same case marking (i.e., it is following the ergative-absolutive pattern). It is unusual to ascribe the property of changing state to A (try it in English by thinking of as many verbs as you can). Hence, ergative-absolutive systems seem to be focusing on the nominal that is undergoing a change of state. I will refer to this nominal as the patient.

Notice that intransitive clauses can either depict S as an agent or patient depending on the semantic content of the verb. Some languages adjust their relation-marking systems to capture this semantic difference. If the intransitive verb has an agent as its sole argument, they mark S according to the nominative-accusative system. If the intransitive verb has a patient, they mark S according to the ergative-absolutive system. This phenomenon is referred to as **split intransitivity**. The Eastern Pomo (Hokan: United States) data in (14) exemplify split intransitivity in the form of the personal pronouns (in bold type).

- (14) a. **Xá:su:là** **wí** **ko:k^hóya**
rattlesnake 1S bit
A rattlesnake bit me(P)
- b. **Há:** **mí:pal** **śá:ka**
1S him killed
I(A) killed him.
- c. **Wí** **qá:lálma**
1S sick
I(S) got sick.
- d. **Há:** **xá:qákki**
1S bathe
I(S) bathed

The two transitive clauses in (14a) and (14b) exhibit the usual form of the first-person singular pronouns for A and P. With an intransitive verb whose subject is nonvolitional, the S takes the same personal pronoun as the P does in (14a). In contrast, the S of a verb indicating a volitional activity takes the same personal pronoun as an A. Thus, the intransitive verbs are split in the manner that their subjects are marked.

One question that may have entered your mind is what split-intransitive languages do with intransitive verbs that can have either a volitional (with an agent) or nonvolitional (with a patient) reading (cf. the English verb *cough*, which denotes an activity that can be carried out on purpose or an activity that happens involuntarily). Some languages seem to place these verbs in one pattern and keep them there regardless of semantics. Other languages such as Eastern Pomo are fluid and alter the marking to match the semantics (15).

- (15) a. Wí če:xélka
is slip
I(P) am slipping. (accidentally)
- b. Há: če:xélka
is slip
I(A) am sliding. (deliberately)

The splits in the case-agreement systems examined so far have occurred on the basis of verbal semantics. Sometimes splits occur along the lines of tense and aspect (this phenomenon is usually placed under the rubric of **split ergativity**). These splits are so consistent cross-linguistically that we can propose the following universal:⁶

- (16) If a language has split ergativity based on tense or aspect, the ergative-absolutive pattern is found either in the past tense or in the perfect aspect.

An example of split ergativity comes from Georgian (17):

- (17) a. Student-i midis (present)
student-CM goes
The student goes.
- b. Student-i ceril-s cers (present)
student-CM letter-CM writes

- c. Student-i mivida (perfect)
student-CM went
The student went.
- d. Student-ma ceril-i dacera (perfect)
student-CM letter-CM wrote
The student wrote the letter.

In the present tense (17a and 17b), Georgian follows a nominative-accusative pattern. Thus, the same case suffix *-i* is found on the subjects of the respective clauses. In the perfect (17c and 17d), there is a switch to ergative-absolutive. Now it is the P of the transitive clause, rather than the A, on which the *-i* is located.

A division of marking on the basis of tense or aspect may at first appear odd. There is good reason, however, to believe that this split occurs due to the same type of verbal semantics that we examined previously with split intransitivity. Normally, past tense and perfect aspect are used to depict completed events that lead to other events (either directly causing them or indirectly affecting them due to being temporally contiguous). If each event is conceptualized as a state in time, then the passing of one event means there is a change in state. As discovered previously, focusing on a change in state is characteristic of ergative-absolutive marking.

Although verbal categories often affect the type of marking used in language, it is also common to find nominal properties having an effect. For example, Dyirbal (Pama-Nyungan: Australia) is mostly ergative-absolutive in its marking (18a and 18b), but it uses a nominative accusative pattern when first- and second-person pronouns are employed (18c-18f):

- (18) a. ɳuma banaga-nu
father return-PST
Father returned.
- b. yabu ɳuma-ɳgu bura-n
mother father-ERG see-PST
Father saw mother.
- c. ɳana banaga-nu
1P return-PST
We returned.
- d. nura banaga-nu
2P return-PST
You returned.

e.	nura	ŋana-na	bura-n
	2P	1P-CM	see-PST

You saw us.

f.	ŋana	nura-na	bura-n
	1P	2P-CM	see-PST

We saw you.

(Data from Dixon 1979)

In addition to splits based on whether the referent is pronominal or not, languages base splits on definiteness and animacy. Once again, there is a pattern behind all these splits. I return to this topic in Chapter 13.

2.0. Complexity of Case and Agreement Systems

In the previous section, the interaction between case and agreement (and to some extent word order) was examined. In this section, the two types of marking are examined independently to answer the question, just how complex does agreement (or case) get?

In the context of case and agreement, the question of complexity is a vague one because the systems can be complex in many different ways. By complexity, one might intend the overall number of distinct forms that occur in the system, or one might mean the different kinds of semantic information that the system encodes. Still further, one might take complexity to be the number of instances of agreement (or case) that co-occur in a single clause. Rather than attempting to explore all these possibilities, this section provides some examples of robust agreement and case systems to give some sense of just how intricate such systems can be. Along the way, I offer some general comments on the types of information that are commonly marked in these systems.

■ 2.1. Verb Agreement

In Section 1.1, the agreement hierarchy was introduced. It was noted that agreement does not commonly extend beyond subjects and objects. When there is agreement with other nominal types, it is often of a special kind. For

example, in some languages, the presence of four arguments can be indexed on the verb but only if there is no overt noun phrase in the sentence (19).

(19)	Y-a-kí-mú-bá-hé-er-eye
	He-PST-it-him-them-give-BEN-ASP

He gave it to him for them.

(Data from Kimenyi 1980)

The Kinyarwanda sentence in (19) identifies four participants involved in the action of giving with prefixes on the verb; the subject *y-* ("he"), the object *ki-* ("it"), the indirect object *mu-* ("him"), and the benefactive *ba-* ("them"). Three of these prefixes, however, are not *agreement* in the usual sense of the word. The direct object, indirect object, and benefactive prefixes can only be used if there is no noun phrase in the sentence that corresponds to them. Thus, if the noun phrase *abaana* ("children") were to be placed after the verb as the benefactive nominal, the prefix *ba-* would not appear. Therefore, the prefix does not cross-reference a nominal but serves as a substitute for it. For this reason, it is not a canonical instance of agreement.

A few languages do allow for agreement with four nominals but only in causative constructions. This is the situation in Abaza (Northwest Caucasian: Russia and Turkey):

(20)	alágačʷ ác'ykʷəncʷakʷa llá aphʷápa y-gʷ-y-z-d-m-l-r-ətxd
	boys old.man dog girl 3S-NEG-3P-POT-3S.HUM-NEG-3S.FEM-CAUS-gave

The old man couldn't make the boys give the girl her dog back.

(Adapted from Allen 1956)

Unlike the Kinyarwanda (19), the Abaza sentence permits the agreement prefixes to co-occur with overt noun phrases. Hence, this represents an instance of agreement.

To my knowledge, no language that permits agreement with five nominals simultaneously has ever been reported. The reason for this fact may be partly due to processing constraints. It may simply be too complex for humans to process that much agreement within a clause. More likely, however, the limits on agreement arise for more mundane reasons. In any language, it is not very common for speakers and writers to include five nominals within a single clause. Consequently, there is little pressure on languages to develop agreement systems to cross-reference this many nominals.

In addition to the number of arguments that can be referenced on a verb, agreement systems also vary in the types of information that the agreement indicates. It is quite common for languages to possess agreement that operates in terms of person or number or both. In the Abaza data (20), for example, all the agreement prefixes indicate third person and singular number. In addition, they can mark whether a nominal is human (*d-* is third singular human, whereas *y-* is third singular nonhuman) and the gender of a nominal (*l-* is third singular *feminine*). In other languages, animacy, rather than humanness, may be indicated by agreement.

The Kinyarwanda sentence in (19) introduces yet another type of semantic information that can play a role in agreement—noun classes. In Bantu languages such as Kinyarwanda, nouns all are assigned to a class. Nouns such as *umugore* (“woman”), *umugabo* (“man”), and *umuuntu* (“person”) are in Class 1, whereas *igitabo* (“book”) and *igaari* (“bicycle”) are Class 5.⁷ When an agreement prefix is employed, it must correspond to the class of the nominal that it is cross-referencing.

Finally, the definiteness of a nominal may determine, in part, whether it triggers agreement or what form the agreement takes (21).

- (21) a. Kassa borsa-w-in wässädä-w
 Kassa wallet-the-OBJ took-it
 Kassa took the wallet.
 b. Kassa borsa wässädä
 Kassa wallet took.
 Kassa took a wallet.

(Data from Givón 1976)

Abkhaz (Northwest Caucasian: Turkey), represented in (21), uses an agreement system that is sensitive to the definiteness of direct objects. If they are definite, an agreement suffix is used (21a); otherwise, no suffix appears (21b).

■ 2.2. Case Systems

The number of cases found in languages ranges from 0 to as many as 53 (this system being reported by Comrie 1981 for Tabassaran [Northeast Caucasian: Russia]). Despite the potential variance suggested by these figures, the organization of case systems tends to follow certain restrictions.

When languages develop case systems containing more than 8 distinct cases, almost invariably it is because they express different notions of loca-

tion—such as “to,” “from,” “at,” and so on—with case inflections. In Finnish (Finno-Ugric: Finland), for example, which has 15 cases, 9 of them are geared toward expressing types of location (Blake 1994):

- | | |
|----------|--|
| (22) -na | “at” |
| -ssa | “in” |
| -lla | “to” |
| -tta | “of/among” |
| -sta | “from” (inside) |
| -ltा | “from” (outside) |
| -ksi | “through” |
| -Vn | “into” (NB: V indicates vowel. The particular vowel varies for this suffix.) |
| -lle | “towards” |

A second observation, due to Blake (1994), about the organization of case systems is that they generally adhere to the following hierarchy:

- (23) Nominative > accusative-ergative > genitive > dative > locative > ablative-instrumental > others

This hierarchy is to be understood as follows: If a case on the hierarchy is found in a language, this language also tends to have any cases to the left—for example, if a language has dative case, it will also have genitive, accusative (or ergative), and nominative.

A four-case system, as just described, is fairly common. It is found, for instance, in ancient Greek (Hellenic):

- | | | |
|-------------|--------|--------------|
| (24) log-os | “word” | (nominative) |
| log-on | | (accusative) |
| log-ou | | (genitive) |
| log-ō | | (dative) |

For contrast, compare the paradigm in (25), which comes from Tamil (Dravidian: India and Sri Lanka):⁸

- | | | |
|------------|------------------------|--------------|
| (25) maram | “tree” | (nominative) |
| maratt-ai | “tree” (direct object) | (accusative) |

maratt-uṭaiya	“of the tree”	(genitive)
maratt-ukku	“to the tree”	(dative)
maratt-il	“at the tree”	(locative)
maratt-iliruntu	“from the tree”	(ablative)
maratt-äl	“using the tree”	(instrumental)
maratt-ōtu	“together with the tree”	(sociative)

(Data from Steever 1987)

Although the Tamil case system is more robust than Greek, it still bears out the predictions of the hierarchy in (23).

Case systems are not only designed to reflect semantic roles and grammatical relations. They also can indicate animacy, humanness, and definiteness. One common scenario is for languages to place direct objects in the accusative if they are definite (or animate or human, depending on the language) and leave them unmarked or in an oblique case (i.e., a case other than nominative, accusative, ergative, or absolutive) if they are indefinite. Recall that these semantic categories were also significant for agreement systems.

3.0. Summary

Case and agreement provide two basic mechanisms for indicating the grammatical and semantic relationships that hold among the elements of clause. In this chapter, some basic observations about these systems were provided. It was noted that when case and agreement co-occur in language, they are characteristically employed in concert in a maximally economical fashion. Although all languages appear to employ some combination of case, agreement, and constituent order to identify core grammatical relations, it was demonstrated that the organization of this marking system can differ in some fundamental ways—for example, along nominative-accusative or ergative-absolutive lines.

Such systems can be quite intricate. Languages need not be consistently ordered in one way; rather, they can split their marking systems in various fashions, according to different components of grammar, verb semantics, verbal categories such as tense and aspect, or nominal categories such as

definiteness and animacy. Indeed, the role of animacy and definiteness in the morphosyntax of clauses can be quite profound—far beyond what I have indicated. Consequently, I turn to this topic in Chapter 10.

4.0. Key Terms

Accusative-focus	Split ergativity
Ergative-absolutive	Split intransitivity
Neutral	Tripartite
Nominative-accusative	

Notes

1. Verbs do not agree with third-person singular subjects and only agree in specific circumstances with third-person plural subjects. Thus, no subject agreement is found in (2b) and (2c).
2. Data are taken from Rosen (1984). In fact, Lakhota does not always follow the pattern of agreement exhibited in (4). Rather, the language is an example of a language with split intransitivity, which is explained later in the chapter.
3. Dixon (1972) was the first to propose labels of this sort. The label A was chosen because subjects of transitive clauses are prototypically semantic agents. The label P was chosen because objects of transitive clauses are prototypically semantic patients. In essence, however, these labels are syntactic. The surface subject of a transitive clause does not have to be a semantic agent: In “John suffered the humiliation,” *John* is not an agent but an experiencer.
4. In many languages, an ergative case affix often marks an additional function such as instrumental (as in Tibetan) or possessive (as in Eskimo). Also, in some instances, the ergative case is employed only when necessary for disambiguation.
5. Indeed, one of the functions of passive voice is to permit a nonagentive nominal to occur as an A.
6. Stephen Levinsohn (personal communication, 1990) brought this universal to my attention.
7. There are 16 different noun classes in Kinyarwanda.
8. I have provided glosses for the various forms as an aid to readers who might not be familiar with the labels given to the various cases. These glosses, however, should not be taken too literally.