Finnish Structural Case: Myths, Facts, and a New Analysis

Finnish has two layers of Differential Object Marking: (1) accusative vs. partitive, and (2) a four-way morphological split in the realization of accusative case. Both accusative and partitive objects are structural, but they convey different aspectual meanings:

(1) a. *korjaa-n se-n*$_{\text{Acc}}$ 'I'm fixing it' b. *korjaa-n si-tä*$_{\text{Part}}$ 'I'm [working on] fixing it'

Recent work has converged on the view that accusative case is assigned/checked in a higher telic Aspect head in virtue of object raising to AspP, while partitive case is assigned/checked in a lower structural position (Borer 1998, 2005, Megerdoomian 2000, van Hout 2000, Ritter & Rosen 2000, Csirmaz 2002, Svenonius 2002, Thomas 2003, Kratzer 2004, Baker 2015, 2021).

Only pronouns have accusative morphology. In nominals, accusative is realized as (or replaced by) partitive under negation, as nominative when there is no agreeing subject, otherwise as genitive. These alternations remain largely unexplained.

I revisit and revise the empirical generalizations, review the challenges that they pose to existing analyses of Finnish and to theories of case in general, and put forward a new proposal in the Case Licensing framework (Kiparsky 2000, Wunderlich 2003, Galbraith 2022).

I claim that accusative and partitive objects sit in the same syntactic position, contrary to the raising analysis. (2)-(5) illustrate four arguments for this. Case has no effect on the order of VP adverbs and objects, see (2). Raising would violate the that Co-ordinate Structure Constraint and predict the wrong word order, see (3). (4) shows Accusative and Partitive are parallel in ellipsis, and (5) that Infinitives, which have no aspect and no AspPhrase, can still have Accusative objects.

(2) a. Lu-i-n koko kirja-n tunni-ssa / ... tunni-ssa koko kirja-n
  read-PST.1SG whole book-ACC$_{\text{GEN}}$ hour-INESS / ... hour-INESS whole book-ACC$_{\text{GEN}}$
  'I read the/a whole book in an hour'

  b. Lu-i-n kirja-a koko tunni-n / ... koko tunni-n kirja-a
  read-PST.1SG book-PART whole hour-ACC$_{\text{GEN}}$ / ... whole hour-ACC$_{\text{GEN}}$ book-PART
  'I read the/a book for a whole hour'

(3) a. Poliisi ampui naise-n ja itse-ä-än. [Headline]
  police.NOM shoot-PAST woman-**ACC$_{\text{GEN}}$** and self-**PART**-POSS
  'Police officer shot the/a woman and [at] himself.' [She died. He may have lived.]

  b. Poliisi ampui nais-ta ja itse-nsä.
  police.NOM shoot-PAST woman-**PART** and self-**ACC**
  'Police officer shot (at) the/a woman and himself.'

a. ... naisen ... [... [t ja itseään]$_{\text{DP}}$]$_{\text{VP}}$... b. ... itsensä ... [... [naista ja t]$_{\text{DP}}$]$_{\text{VP}}$...

(4) Tuntu-u vähän sama-lta kuin arvostel-isi kirja-n luke-ma-tta [∅].
  feel-3SG a bit same-ABLAT as review-SBJ-3SG book-ACC$_{\text{GEN}}$ read-Inf-ABESS
  'It feels a bit like reviewing a/the book without reading [it].'

(5) On aika luke-a lehti ja kirja-a.
  be-3SG time.NOM read-Inf paper-**ACC$_{\text{NOM}}$** and book-**PART**
  'It's time to read a/the newspaper and a/the book' [finishing at least the paper]

(6)-(7) show that the Partive/Accusative distinction is not tied to telicity, but depends on bound-edness, in a sense that is formally definable on argument structure, but is not tied to any syntactically motivated phrase structure position. Possession, perception, and cognition predicates are atelic but assign Accusative, see (6); conversely, degree achievement predicates (Kennedy & Mcnally 2004) are telic but assign Partitive, see (7).

(6) a. Minu-lla on   sinu-t   / *sinu-a.   b. Nä-i-n   se-n   koko päivä-n.
        I-ADESS   be-3SG you-**ACC**$_{ACC}$ / you-**PART**   see-PST-1SG it-**ACC**$_{GEN}$ whole day-**ACC**$_{GEN}$
        'I have you.'   'I saw it all day.'

(7) Räätäli lyhens-i   hamet-ta senti-n   verran tunni-ssa (#tunni-n)   *(telic!)*
    tailor.NOM shorten-PST3SG skirt-**PART** cm.-ACC$_{GEN}$ by   hour-INESS (hour-ACC$_{GEN}$)
    'The/a tailor shortened the skirt by a centimeter in an hour (#for an hour).'

A third set of arguments shows that the diverse realizations of accusative case are not allomorphs but distinct case morphemes. Unlike allomorphy, these case alternations take place within an unbounded syntactic domain, an arbitrarily long chain of non-finite clauses.

Our Case Licensing framework distinguishes between Abstract Case, represented at Argument Structure, and morphological/morphosyntactic case, represented in syntactic structure. At both levels, case is decomposed by the features [±H(ighest) R(ole)] and [±L(owest) R(ole)]. The featural decomposition of case and basic principles of the theory predict this mapping from first principles.

Accusative and Partitive are distinct Abstract Cases. The object of a two-place predicate like *shoot* has abstract Partitive Case [–HR, +LR]. Abstract Accusative objects have an extra Degree argument below them that is related to a conventionally fixed standard of achievement (either implicit or specified by a VP adverb) hence [–HR, –LR]. The Degree argument is specified as a positive polarity item, and thus falls in with other Degree arguments such as *at least*, hence the "partitive of negation".

(8) a. *shoot:* $\lambda y \lambda x$ (SHOOT (x y)) (Partitive)

     b. *shoot:* $\lambda d \lambda y \lambda x$ (SHOOT (x y d) $\wedge$ d $\geqslant$ s$_{shoot}$) (Accusative)

The lexicon and morphology provide word forms that are combined in the syntax. Nouns and pronouns bear morphological cases defined by the same case features as those that define the Abtract cases. The morphological/morphosyntactic cases of Finnish are:

(9) a. Nominative: [   ]
     b. Accusative: [–HR,–LR] (pronouns only)
     c. Partitive: [–HR, +LR]
     d. Genitive: [–LR]

The syntax constructs the best match between Abstract Case and morphological case, which is the most specific match such that the feature values don't conflict. This is formalized as a set of ranked violable constraints, which derive all and only the grammatical case patterns of finite and non-finite clauses.

(10) 1. IDENT(F): Abstract [αF] corresponds to morphological [αF].

      2. NOM: A clause has a structural nominative.

      3. UNIFY(F): Abstract [αF] does not correspond to morphological [–αF].

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