

Ch. 29. Case in decline

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29.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the main aspects of the reduction/loss of case and the decay of case marking systems. The general mechanisms which lead to the merger of case and case syncretism and, eventually, to the loss of (some) cases include: (i) phonetic processes which result in the loss of the difference between two or more case forms, i.e. erosion of case inflection, and, thus, in case syncretism; (ii) overlapping of syntactic and semantic functions and/or uses of individual cases, i.e. syntactic and semantic affinity of some cases; (iii) semantic or functional overlapping of whole argument structures, and (iv) a variety of analogical developments and paradigmatic levelling (cf. Kulikov 2006).

Often these mechanisms work together so that several factors create favourable (albeit not always sufficient) conditions for the case mergers. The phenomenon of case syncretism can be best illustrated with examples from the history of the Indo-European languages which attest nearly all possible types of case mergers within the original eight-case Proto-Indo-European case system: genitive-ablative (Slavic, Greek), nominative-accusative (Balkan: Rumanian, Albanian), dative-locative (Greek), ablative-instrumental-locative (Latin), dative-ablative-instrumental-locative (Celtic, Germanic), etc. (cf. Luraghi 1987 and chapter 13 above). The ultimate case syncretism is typically preceded by a period of variation and alternation between case forms or argument structures, with the source forms being interchangeably employed in some usages with only some minor functional distinctions (see Kulikov 2007). The interplay between phonetic erosion and the semantic/functional overlap of case forms and argument structure constructions can be demonstrated with examples from several Indo-European language groups, as these provide rich evidence for various scenarios of the decay and collapse of case systems.

29.1 Phonetic Erosion of Case Inflection

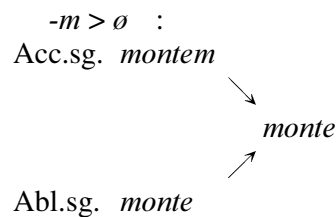
In the simplest and most trivial cases, the (partial) merger of case morphemes and, eventually, the decay of case systems is due to certain phonological changes, foremost, to the erosion of inflexion in word-final position (in languages with case suffixes) or, much more rarely, in word-initial position (in languages with case prefixes). Such a development may result in case syncretism, where case distinctions are erased in their entirety.

The evolution of the Arabic nominal inflection provides an instructive example. In the post-classical period, Arabic undergoes a strong reduction of case endings, resulting in the loss of the original three-case system. Phonologically, these processes essentially amount to the weakening, merger, and the subsequent loss of final vowels (in particular, Nom.Sg. *-u*, Gen.Sg. *-i* and Acc.Sg. *-a*). Middle Arabic of the Southern Palestinian Christian texts of the 8th–10th centuries A.D. still exhibits vestiges of case distinctions, although the oppositions of the classical language appear severely deteriorated. One case variation found in this period is that between the genitive, accusative, and nominative on nominal forms preceded by prepositions (where case endings were preserved longer than in many other contexts), as illustrated in (1):

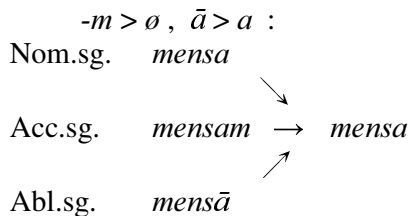
- (1) Southern Palestinian Christian Middle Arabic (Gruber-Miller 1990: 244f.)
- a. w-l-ʔb-ii-h
and-to-father-GEN-his
'... and to his father'
 - b. mʕ ʔb-aa-hmaa
with father-ACC-their
'...with their father'
 - c. y-tklm ʕlaa ʔx-uu-h
3MASC.SG.IMPF-speak against brother-NOM-his
'He speaks against his brother ...'

Another example of the total collapse of a case system, primarily due to phonetic developments in word-final position and erosion of case endings, can be seen in the history of the Proto-Romance (i.e. Latin) case system in the daughter languages. Latin attests the very beginning of the decay of the original Proto-Indo-European case system (see Section 29.2 below), which has affected all Romance languages. The daughter languages, i.e. Spanish, Italian, French, Rumanian etc., display the same tendency, reducing the Latin case system further, ending up with caseless systems or with two cases at maximum as in Rumanian (Penny 1991; Calabrese 1998; Blake: 2001: 175f.). This can be shown with an example from Spanish where the relevant phonological changes are the following:

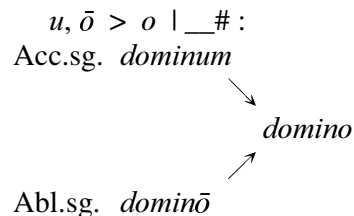
- (i) Loss of final *-m* mostly causing Acc.sg. to merge with the Abl.sg.:



- (ii-iii) The merger of the long and short *a*, together with the loss of final *-m* (i) caused the merger of Nom., Acc. and Abl.sg.



- (iv) The merger of *u* and *ō* in final position caused the merger of Acc.sg. and Abl.sg.:



(v) The merger of the front vowels in final position caused the merger of Nom.-Acc.pl. (*montēs*) with Gen.sg. (*montis*)

By the 4th–5th centuries AD these changes had resulted in a considerable reduction of the case paradigm: a three-case system in the Eastern part of the Roman empire and two cases in most of the West, including Spain. The latter entails that the three oblique cases had merged into one common form, hence the system consisted of only nominative and oblique case, as illustrated by the following three examples (Penny 1991: 104):

Table 29.1. Old Spanish case system

Nom.sg.	<i>rosa</i>	<i>annos</i>	<i>leo</i>
Obl.sg.	<i>rosa</i>	<i>anno</i>	<i>leone</i>
Nom.pl.	<i>rosas</i>	<i>anni</i>	<i>leones</i>
Obl.pl.	<i>rosas</i>	<i>annos</i>	<i>leones</i>

Such two-case systems survived in French (see below) and Provençal until the 12th–13th centuries (cf. chapter 47 below for a typological analysis of two-case systems). In other areas, there was a further reduction to invariable singular and plural forms. By virtue of additional phonetic changes most of the contrasts shown in the above table have become obliterated, surviving only for *anni* ~ *annos*. Of course, this isolated subtype could not survive for a long time, foremost due to the levelling pressure of the morphological paradigm. Accordingly, the form *annos* has been generalized as a plural form, in analogy with plural *-s* from other words in the nominal paradigm. The resulting system of the three major paradigmatic classes that Spanish inherits from Latin is represented in Table 29.2:

Table 29.2. Modern Spanish nominal paradigm

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Sg.	<i>rosa</i>	<i>año</i>	<i>leon</i>
Pl.	<i>rosas</i>	<i>años</i>	<i>leones</i>

29.2 Functional Mergers

An example of erosion of case inflexion supported by functional mergers is provided by the syncretism of three Proto-Indo-European cases, ablative, locative and instrumental, into the Latin ablative (for details of the history of the Latin case inflexion, see, in particular, Leumann, Hofmann, and Szantyr 1977: 405ff.). The relevant fragment of the system of case endings reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European is represented in Table 29.3. The endings which have left direct reflexes in the actually attested markers of ablative are in the bold face while those which have only indirectly contributed to the attested endings are bold and underlined:

Table 29.3. Proto-Indo-European ablative, locative and instrumental case endings

	Singular	Plural
Ablative	*-(o)s *-ed	*-ios
Locative	*-i *-o	*-su *-oisu
Instrumental	*-(e)h ₁	*-ōis

**-bhi* (/ **-mi*) **-bhi-s*[†]

† For the endings of the instrumental in the proto-language and their relations with the inflexion of the dative and ablative plural, see, in particular, Kortlandt 2003: 48f.

The resulting system of ablative endings, arranged by declension types, is shown in Table 29.4. Although the origins of some actually attested endings may be the subject of debate, the main details of the scenario are quite clear:¹

Table 29.4. Latin ablative case endings and their Proto-Indo-European sources

Declensions	Singular	Plural
1st (- <i>a</i> -)	- <i>ā(d)</i> [analogy with - <i>o</i> -type]	- <i>īs</i> < * <i>-oisu</i> and/or * <i>-ōis</i>
2nd (- <i>o</i> -)	- <i>ō(d)</i> (< * <i>...o-ed</i>)	
3rd (- <i>i</i> -, - <i>C</i> -)	- <i>ī(d)</i> [analogy with - <i>o</i> -type] - <i>e</i> < * <i>-i</i>	- <i>bus</i> < * <i>-bhos</i> (← * <i>-ios</i> + * <i>-bhis</i> ?)
4th (- <i>u</i> -)	- <i>ū(d)</i> [analogy with - <i>o</i> -type]	
5th (- <i>e</i> -)	- <i>ē</i> < * <i>...e-eh₁</i>	

This example from Latin is useful as it shows that phonetic processes may render opaque formal distinctions between cases, thus leading to the merger of some forms (as in the case of Loc. and Ins.pl.), although they do not represent the *only* driving force of case syncretism. All three source cases have left their traces both in the singular and plural paradigms at least in some of the attested Latin declensions, so phonetic processes alone could not yet result in the simple syncretism of these three cases. Hence, the final outcome is a result of a complex interplay of several mechanisms; in particular, the three source cases must be considered semantically (functionally) close enough to each other, which in turn has licensed the form of one of them to take over the functions of the other(s).

29.3 Analogical Developments and Paradigmatic Levelling:

Total Collapse of Case Systems

An instructive example of a total collapse of a case system primarily based on a number of analogical developments and paradigmatic levelling is provided by the evolution of the Old French two-case system. By the Old French period only two cases have survived (usually called subject and object cases, or ‘*sujet*’ and ‘*régime*’), as illustrated in Table 29.5 (for details and discussion, see e.g. Plank 1979; van Reenen and Schøsler 2000):

¹ The genesis of the Abl.pl. ending of the 3rd, 4th and 5th declensions -*bus* poses some problems. It is likely to represent the Proto-Italo-Celtic **-bhos*, which replaced the original ending **-ios*, presumably under the influence of the Ins.pl. **-bhis* (Kortlandt 2003: 50).

Table 29.5. Old French case system

	masculine	feminine
Subj.sg	<i>li forz mur-s</i> ‘strong wall’	<i>li forz flor-s</i> ‘strong flower’
Obj.sg	<i>le fort mur</i>	<i>la fort flor</i>
Subj.pl	<i>li fort mur</i>	<i>les forz flor-s</i>
Obj.pl	<i>les forz mur-s</i>	<i>les forz flor-s</i>

As Table 29.5 shows, each declension type counts no more than two forms in total, distributed quite intricately across the paradigm. The system becomes even more opaque because of the loss of final *-s* before a consonant:

$-s > -\emptyset \mid _ C$

Thus, for *mur-* we have two allomorphic variants, given in Table 29.6 below:

Table 29.6. Old French case system: phonetic realizations

	$_ V, _ \#\#$	$_ C$
Subj.sg	[myrs]	[my:r]
Obj.sg	[myr]	[myr]
Subj.pl	[myr]	[myr]
Obj.pl	[myrs]	[my:r]

The factors which caused further collapse of this system include: (i) the expansion of constructions with non-canonical subject marking, viz. with the subject encoded by the object case – as, for instance, in impersonal constructions of the type *Il i a _* (i.e. Modern French *Il y a _* ‘There is $_$ ’), which has apparently triggered case variation in the subject position (see Laubscher 1921: 51ff.); (ii) the existence of a few (minor) inflexional types which had completely lost their case distinctions by the Old French period; (iii) the very intricate distribution of as few as two markers, *-ø* and *-s*, across the four member paradigm, which may have rendered the system as “conceptually too complicated” (van Reenen and Schøsler 2000: 337).

29.4 Synonymous Argument Structure Constructions

It is a well-known fact that languages have a tendency to abate synonymous grammatical forms over time. For case and argument structure, this can take place in two ways: (i) the morphological case distinctions disappear with a subsequent merging of the argument structure constructions; (ii) productive case and argument structure constructions attract new verbs and verbs from non-productive constructions, thereby gradually causing non-productive constructions to fall into disuse. Given a definition of productivity based on type frequency, semantic coherence, and an inverse correlation between the two, the productivity of case and argument structure constructions is, at least in part, derived from the size/type frequency of each case construction (cf. Barðdal 2006). Hence, the case construction lowest in type frequency is expected to disappear first, then the one next lowest in type frequency, etc., until only the productive case constructions are left in the language. This development correlates in part with changes in the verbal vocabulary, as productive argument structures attract new verbs while non-productive argument structures do not. Hence, contact situation with massive replacement of the vocabulary can speed up this development. In Germanic both developmental paths outlined above are documented. In Mainland Scandinavian and English the development has led to case merging and case loss, whereas in German and Icelandic

the development has led to the disuse and disappearance of the argument structures lowest in type frequency.

The following case and argument structures can be postulated for two-place predicates in Germanic on the basis of comparative evidence and documented case marking in the history of Icelandic (Barðdal 2007a):

Table 29.7. Case constructions in earlier Germanic

Nom	Acc	Dat	Gen
Nom-Acc	Acc-Nom	Dat-Nom	Gen-Nom
Nom-Dat	Acc-Acc	Dat-Gen	Gen-PP
Nom-Gen	Acc-Gen	Dat-PP	Gen-S
Nom-PP	Acc-PP	Dat-S	
Nom-S	Acc-S		

The case and argument structure construction highest in type frequency in all the Germanic languages was without a doubt the nominative subject construction, while dative subject predicates were low in type frequency and accusative subject predicates were even less common. A comparative study of the semantics of accusative and dative subject predicates across the Germanic languages reveals that they are grossly speaking either (i) stative/inchoative experience-based predicates, or (ii) anticausative intransitives (Barðdal 2004). There was, thus, a considerable overlap in the semantics of accusative and dative subject predicates in Germanic, also found for the nominative subject construction, which was the semantically most open construction of them all. A comparison of Nom-Acc, Nom-Dat and Nom-Gen in Modern Icelandic also reveals that Nom-Dat and Nom-Gen are not strictly confined to any particular semantic fields, but can be regarded semantically as proper subsets of the Nom-Acc argument structure construction (cf. Barðdal 2007b). This comparative evidence suggests that the case and argument structure constructions in Germanic were partly synonymous.

The genitive subject construction, which was lowest in type frequency of all the subject constructions, is not documented in Old English and Old Swedish. It thus seems that it had already disappeared before recorded history. The first documented construction to disappear in Old Swedish is the genitive object construction, i.e. the construction lowest in type frequency of all the object constructions. This took place before 1350 (cf. Delsing 1991). In English, on the other hand, genitive objects disappeared in two rounds; The genitive objects of Acc-Gen and Dat-Gen disappeared during the 12th century while genitive objects of Nom-Gen did not disappear until the 13th century (Allen 1995: 217–19). This is in accordance with differences in the size of these constructions as Acc-Gen and Dat-Gen were much lower in type frequency than the Nom-Gen construction. The distinction between accusative and dative on nouns, both subjects and objects, was lost in English during the 13th century, after the loss of the genitive. Finally, the oblique subject construction (formerly accusative and dative subject construction) starts losing ground during the 15th century and only exists in fixed expressions after that (Allen 1995: ch. 6). In Swedish, moreover, the accusative subject construction (which was lower in type frequency than the dative subject construction) was lost around 1400 (Falk 1997:14–15) and ca. 1450 had the case distinctions on nouns completely disappeared. The oblique subject construction (visible on pronouns) survived in Swedish until the 16th and 17th centuries.

In German the genitive subject construction started disappearing during the 13th century (Seefranz-Montag 1983: 173–75). The genitive object construction has been heavily reduced in the history of German, with only a few predicates left, and so has

the dative object construction, although the dative object construction is still higher in type frequency than the genitive object construction, with perhaps around 100 predicates in total (cf. Maling 2002). The accusative and the dative subject constructions have also been heavily reduced in German, with approximately 80–100 predicates left (cf. Barðdal 2004). In the history of German, moreover, accusative and dative subject predicates have been interchangeable, with dative subject predicates attracting more verbs from the accusative subject construction than the accusative subject construction from the dative one. In summary, the construction lowest in type frequency, i.e. the genitive subject construction, has disappeared, the remaining low type frequency constructions, i.e. genitive and dative objects, and the accusative and dative subject constructions have gone down in type frequency. This is because the predicates instantiating the low type frequency constructions have either disappeared in German or occur now in the Nom(-Acc) construction.

Finally, in Icelandic, only one construction has completely disappeared, namely the Dat-Gen construction, which was instantiated by only two predicates in Old Norse-Icelandic (cf. Barðdal 2001: 197–98). Three other low type frequency constructions are at the boarder of becoming extinct today, namely the Acc-Nom, Acc-Gen and the Gen-Nom constructions. These were slightly higher in type frequency in Old Norse-Icelandic than the Dat-Gen construction, and are now lowest in type frequency of all the case constructions in Modern Icelandic. The Nom-Gen construction has also been reduced in the history of Icelandic. Nom-Dat predicates in Modern Icelandic are approximately 750 (Maling 2002: 31), accusative subject predicates are ca. 200, and dative subject predicates are around 700 (Barðdal 2004). Hence, only the case and argument structure constructions lowest in type frequency in Old Norse-Icelandic have disappeared, and the ones that were already low then, have decreased in type frequency. The constructions of intermediate size have maintained their status (like Nom-Dat), and the most productive Nom-Acc construction has increased its type frequency (cf. Barðdal 2007a).

The loss of case and the time/onset of these changes correlate with the degree of language contact found in the individual Germanic language communities during medieval times. England was exposed to the most language contact and earliest, i.e. during the 11th century. Mainland Scandinavia has been exposed to less contact, beginning in the 13th century. Germany has had considerably less contact and more spread out in time, while Iceland, being the most isolated of the four, has been in the least contact of them all. Clearly, rapid changes in the vocabulary favour the most productive case and argument structure constructions and disfavour the non-productive ones, causing them to fall into disuse earlier.

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